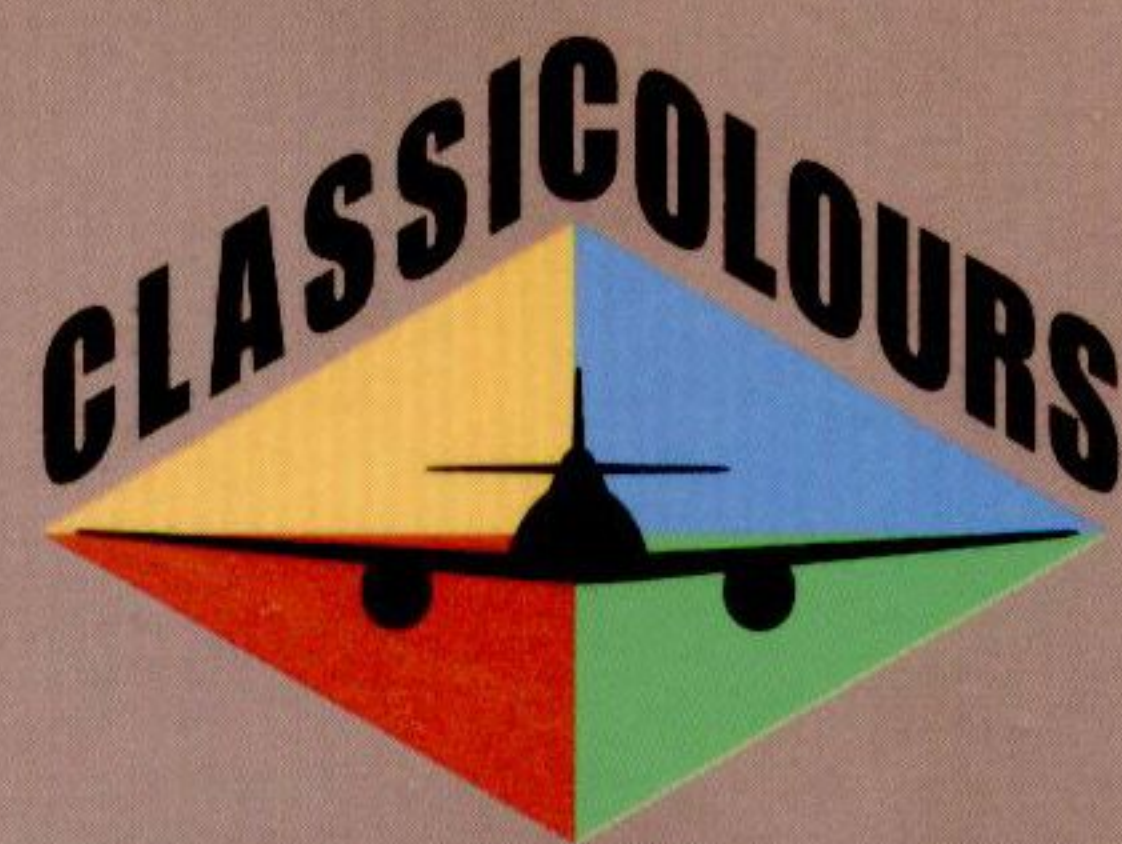


LUFTWAFFE COLOURS
Volume Four Section 2

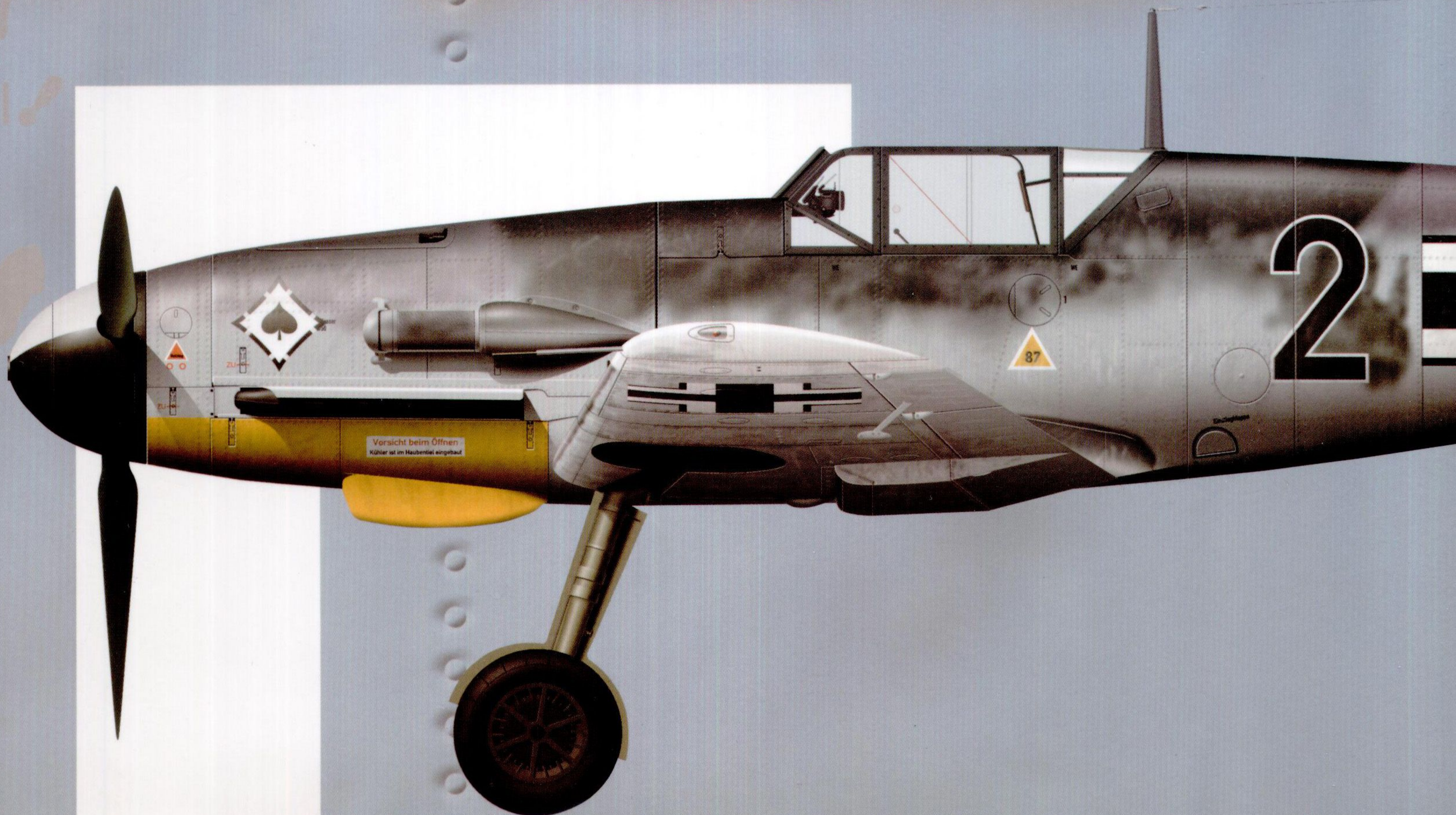


JAGDWAFFE

**Jean-Louis Roba
& Martin Pegg**

**THE
MEDITERRANEAN**

1942-1943



NORTH AFRICA AND TUNISIA

“Wenn die Kriegsgeschichte einmal diese Fäden auseinander halten kann, ringte sie ein Meisterwerk fertig, denn das hat Rommel derartig zu mischen verstanden, dass, ich glaube, das später niemand mehr klar kriegt.”

“If history succeeds in unravelling the threads, it will have achieved a miracle, for Rommel managed to get things into such a mess that I doubt whether anyone will ever be able to make head or tail of it.”

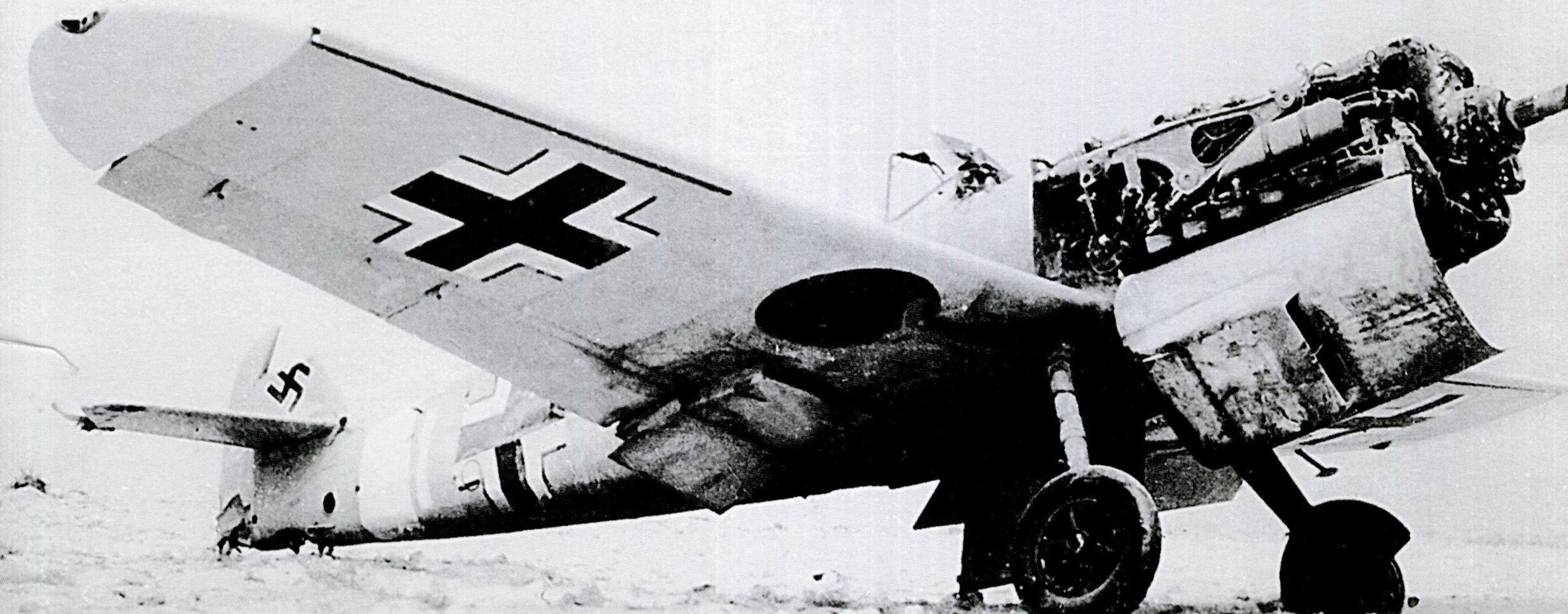
From the interrogation of Generaloberst Halder, 3 September 1945, on the Libyan campaign

“As of today we have a total of 76 cubic metres of petrol available in this theatre of operations. Despite extreme economy measures, our rapidly decreasing supply of fuel is no longer sufficient to permit adequate reconnaissance activity, the necessary fighter escort duty, or the occasional commitment of fighter-bomber aircraft. Our present supply must be kept in reserve in order to avoid development of a serious crisis. Our operations are so hampered by the situation that we have become fully dependent on supplies. British fighter-bomber attacks, increasing both in number and intensity, cannot be countered effectively by the small number of fighter aircraft which can be assigned to freie Jagd patrols. We have had to curtail drastically the employment of dive-bombers because of their relatively high petrol consumption.”

Message from Fliegerführer Afrika to C-in-C South dated 1 August 1942

“The fuel situation of the German units makes any mobile operations, in particular counterattacks by our Panzer formations, more or less impossible. The fuel at present with the troops is just enough to carry out the first stage of the withdrawal as ordered, namely as far as the area Agheila - El Mugtaa (west of Agheila).

Day Report by Panzerarmee, 12 December 1942



July 1942

The Final Month of German Air Superiority

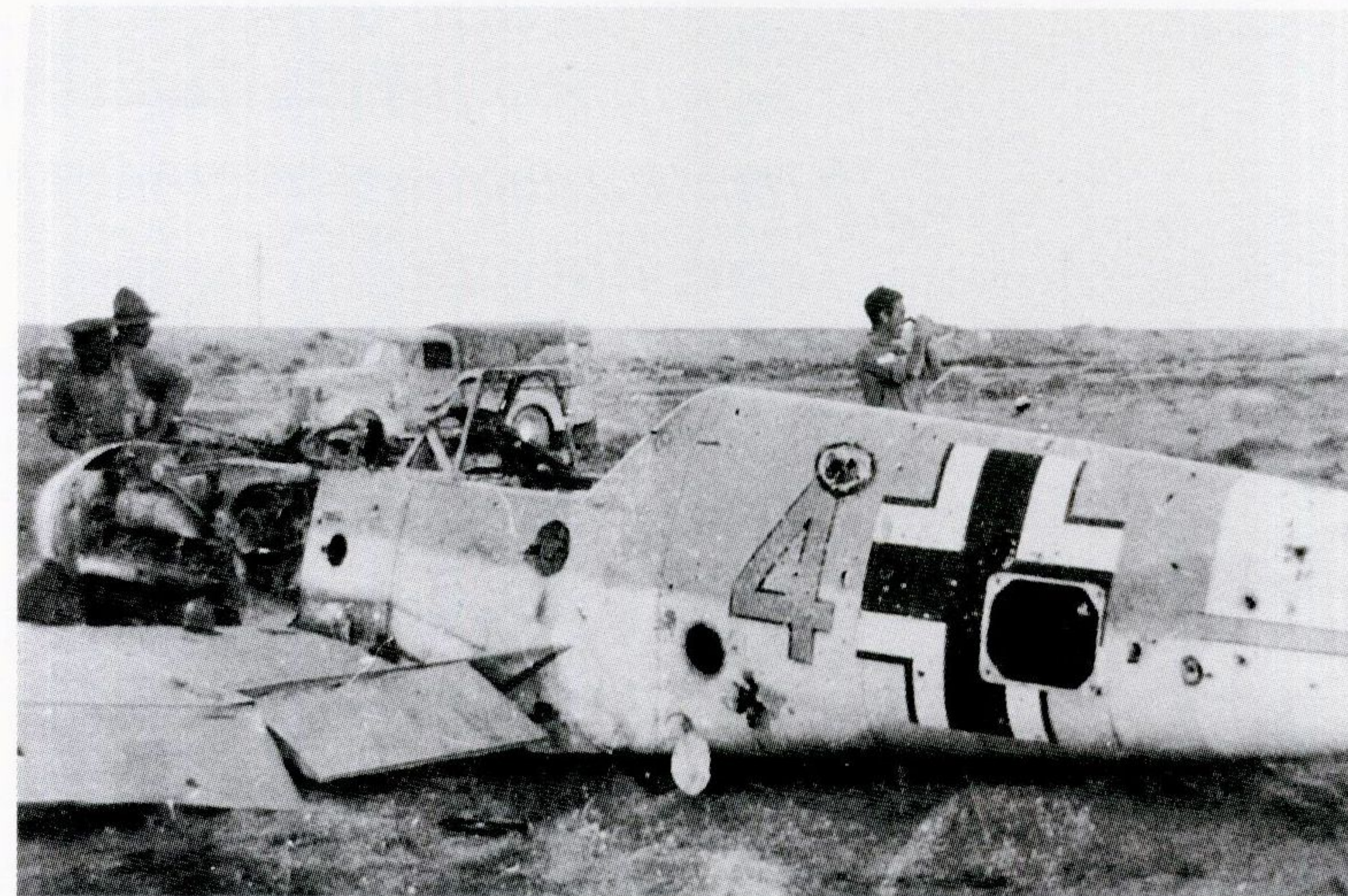
With the fall of Bir Hacheim and the capture of Tobruk, the fighting in North Africa in June 1942 had resulted in a German-Italian victory but left Rommel's ground forces seriously under strength and 370 miles from even his most forward base. Rommel nevertheless believed he was still capable of striking for the Nile Delta and his forces continued to pursue the Allied divisions as they retreated over the Libyan-Egyptian border towards El Alamein. But here the British and Commonwealth forces were determined to hold the El Alamein positions at all costs, resisting if necessary to the last man to prevent German and Italian forces entering Alexandria and the Nile Valley.

Rommel attacked the British lines in a series of engagements which began on 1 July and which later became known as the First Battle of El Alamein. In the air, the *Luftwaffe's* fighter force in North Africa consisted mainly of JG 27 which, on 1 July 1942, was able to assemble a total of 79 fighters distributed as follows:-

Stab/JG 27	2 Bf 109 Fs
I./JG 27	26 Bf 109 F <i>trops</i>
II./JG 27	21 Bf 109 F-4 <i>trops</i>
III./JG 27	30 Bf 109s (21 Bf 109 F-4 <i>trops</i> plus 9 Bf 109 F-4/Bs).

On the question of experience, the balance was tipped in favour of the *Luftwaffe* and *Regia Aeronautica*. On 1 July, for example, I./JG 27, II./JG 27 and III./JG 53 claimed approximately eight victories over enemy fighters, and on the 2nd, two of the greatest aces of I./JG 27, *Lt.* Hans Arnold Stahlschmidt and *Lt.* Friedrich Körner, each claimed two fighters. In the following days, many claims were made by German fighter units, plus a few by the Italians, but on the ground the newly promoted *Feldmarschall* Erwin Rommel was unable to achieve the required breakthrough against the Allied defences. Indeed, counter-attacks launched by Australian and British troops repulsed Rommel's attacks and destroyed or damaged valuable German armour which had survived the preceding battles. Two British attacks on 14/15 July and 21/22 July caused such losses that Rommel, having already committed his last reserves, had to abandon the operation and regroup.

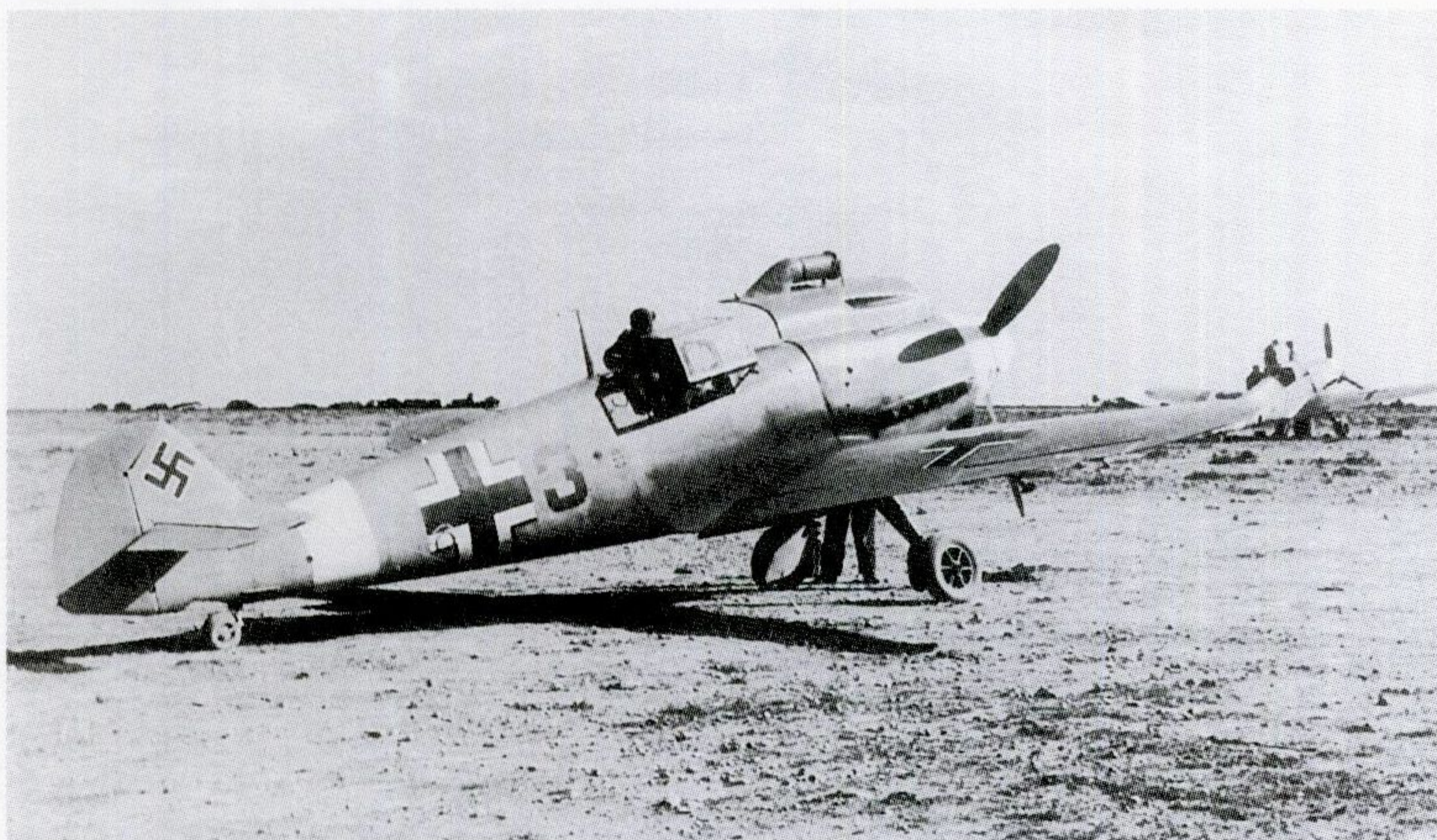
It is naturally impossible to describe all the air engagements of that period, but it should be mentioned that in July 1942, *Hptm.* Ernst Düllberg, flying as *Geschwaderadjutant* in *Obstlt.* Eduard Neumann's *Stab/JG 27*, based at Fuka, claimed a Hurricane that month as his 15th *Abschuss*, the unit suffering just one Bf 109 F-4 which was heavily damaged in aerial combat. In the same month, *Hptm.* Gerhard Homuth's I./JG 27 claimed around 52 victories, nearly all of them over such Allied fighters as

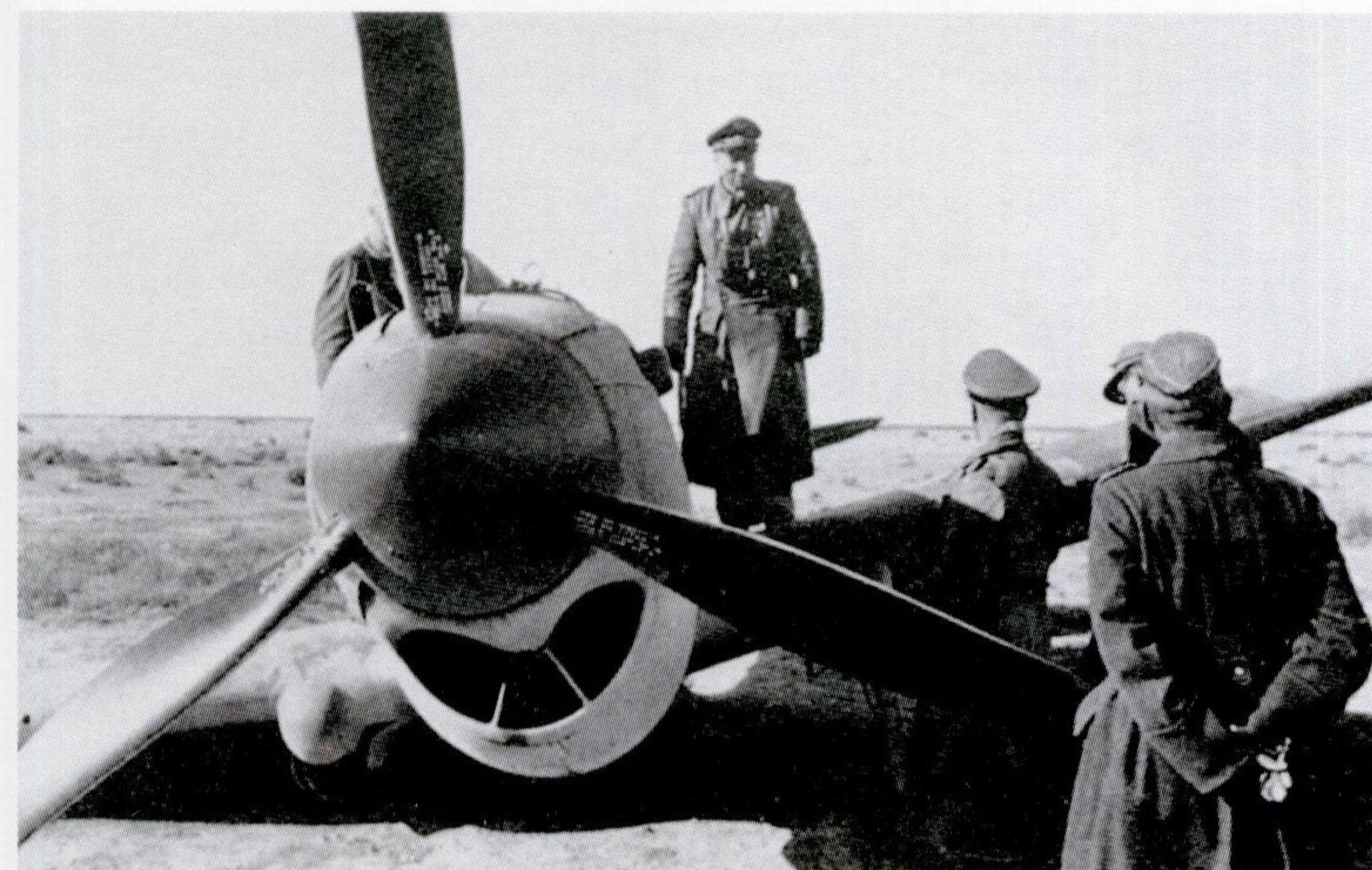


ABOVE: It is thought that this 'Yellow 4' may be the Bf 109 F-4 trop W.Nr. 8548 in which Fw. Fritz Gromotka of 6./JG 27 crash-landed behind Allied lines at Acroma on 31 May 1942. Gromotka was one of three 6. Staffel pilots brought down that day, but while one was killed and another taken prisoner, Gromotka succeeded in evading capture and returned to his unit. In this photograph, the aircraft is being examined by troops from the 2nd New Zealand Division.

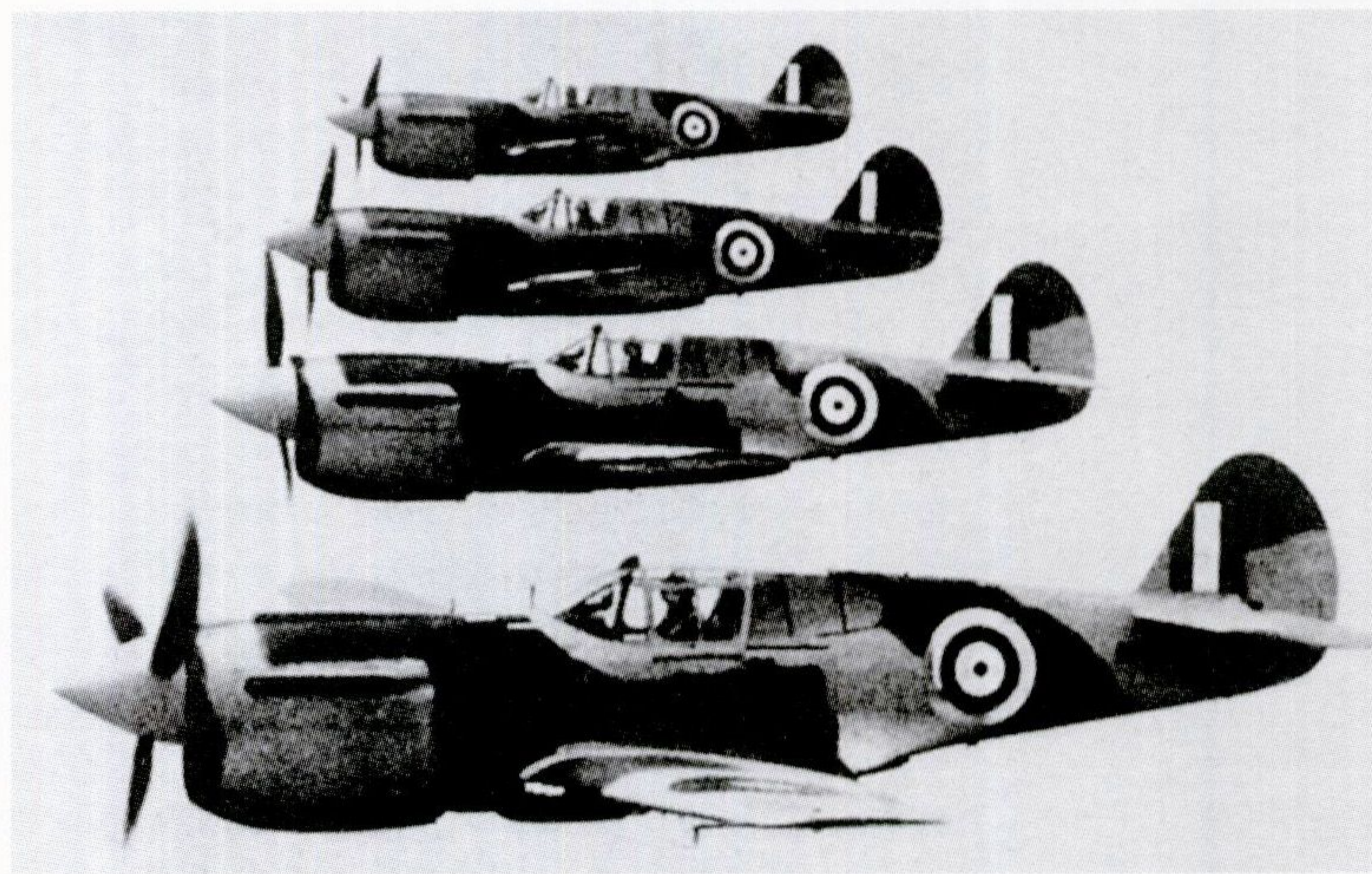
the P-40 and Hurricane but also including a few Spitfires, two Beaufighters and a sole B-24 from the Halverson Detachment which was shot down into the sea on 9 July by Fw. Günther Steinhausen of 1. *Staffel*. At least 15 Bf 109 Fs were destroyed or damaged in the month and three pilots were lost; *Lt.* Karl Kugelbauer was killed when he was shot down in combat on the 8th, Fw. Erich Gerlitzki was shot down by anti-aircraft fire and killed on the 21st, and the famous *Lt.* Friedrich Körner, one of the *Gruppe's* leading aces, became a PoW. Initially based at Bir-el-Astas, the *Gruppe* moved base frequently in the month, first to Mumin Busak, then to Turbiya, and finally to Quotaifiya.

BELOW: Bf 109 F-4/Z trop of 2./JG 27 being serviced in North Africa. The aircraft closest to the camera is 'Red 3' and had a mid-demarcation 78/79 tropical scheme.





ABOVE: Whenever German fighter pilots attempted to attack the RAF's bombers, they were invariably intercepted by the fighter escort and, while achieving some impressive victories against the escort fighters, were rarely permitted to reach the bombers. In this photograph, senior German officers, including Feldmarschall Rommel, standing closest to the wing leading edge with his back to the camera, inspect a damaged P-40.



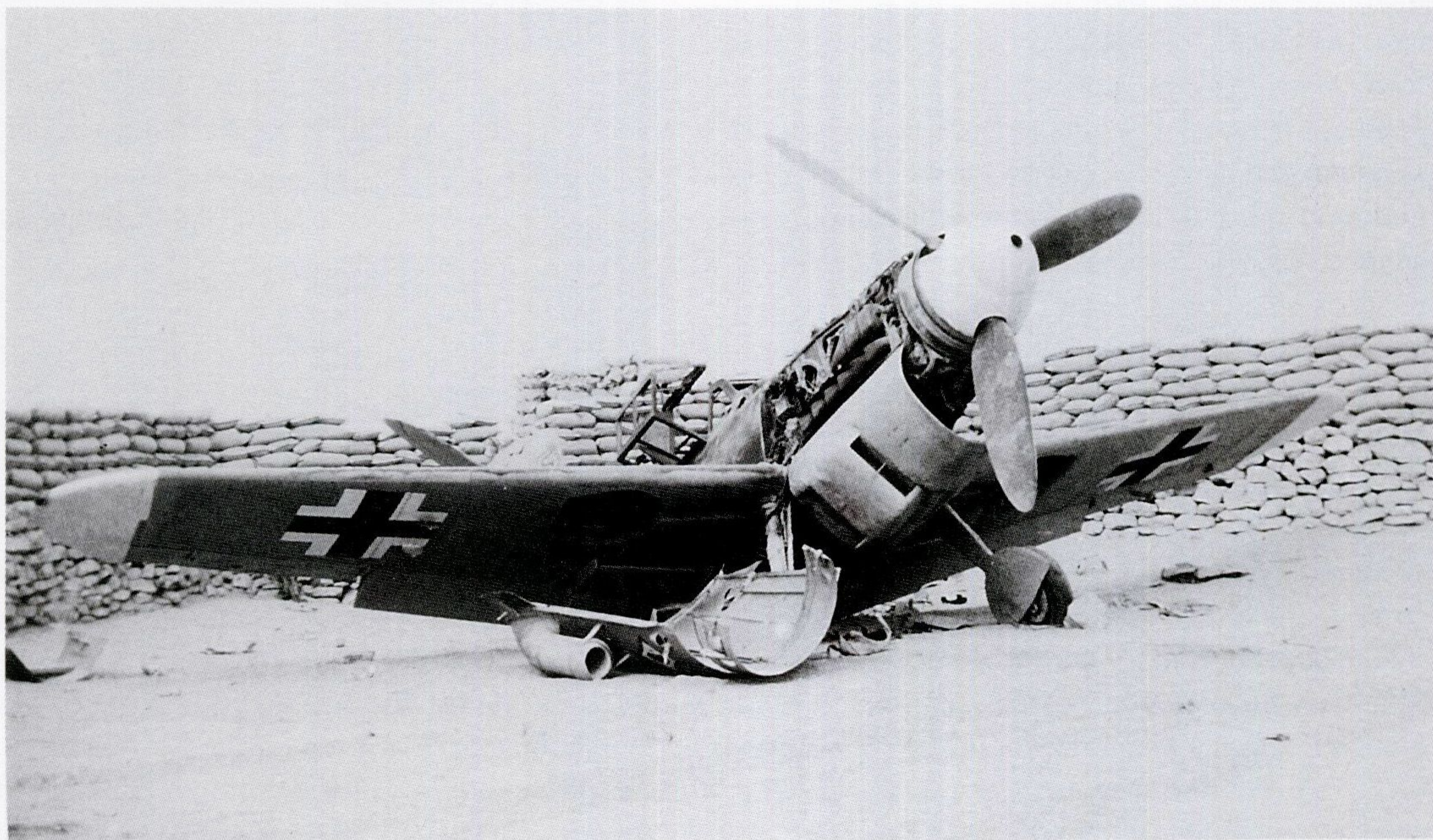
ABOVE: RAF P-40 Kittyhawks in flight over Libya.

At the same time, II./JG 27, based at Fuka under *Hptm.* Gustav Rödel, claimed some 60 victories, all of them single-engined fighters, in return for at least 12 Bf 109 Fs which were lost or damaged. Personnel losses included *Uffz.* Johannes Dix of 6./JG 27, who made a forced landing in enemy territory on the 11th, and two pilots killed on 21 July.

Hptm. Erhard Braune's III./JG 27 claimed 33 enemy fighter aircraft and two Bombay transports destroyed, but its losses were high, with 13 Bf 109 Fs destroyed or damaged, three pilots killed or missing in action and a fourth wounded. This *Gruppe* also transferred frequently, starting the month at Fuka and transferring via Mumin Busak and Quotaifiya to Haggag-el-Quasaba at the end of July where the *Gruppe* remained for the next five weeks. At the beginning of the month, *Oblt.* Werner Schroer moved from 2./JG 27 to become *Staffelkapitän* of 8./JG 27. At that time, Schroer, a close friend of the famous Hans-Joachim Marseille, had 14 *Luftsiege*, but by the end of the month his score had reached 31. He would become one of the *Luftwaffe*'s best desert aces.

Meanwhile, at Quotaifiya, *Hptm.* Erich Gerlitz's III./JG 53, the famous '*Pik As*' *Geschwader*, claimed 15 enemy fighters and a Wellington destroyed, but its own losses were high. On 3 July, *Oblt.* Ernst Klager, *Staffelführer* of 8./JG 53, was shot down and captured near El Alamein, and three other pilots of the *Gruppe* were reported killed or missing. Total III. *Gruppe* losses for July amounted to 18 Bf 109s destroyed or damaged.

While a comparison between claims and losses for the opposing sides in July shows that, with 160 aircraft claimed destroyed, the ratio was in favour of the *Luftwaffe*, it had in fact accounted for only two enemy bombers. In the air above the battle of Alam Halfa, the RAF's light bombers, fighter-bombers and fighters swept over in numbers which increased every day and from the middle of the month the



LEFT: A Bf 109 F completely destroyed in its blast bay by Allied bombing.

RAF launched its bomber squadrons to harass the German-Italian ground troops at night as well. By day, the fighter pilots of Western Desert Air Force stubbornly protected the bombers and although suffering heavy losses, allowed them to strike Axis positions, ships and supply columns. Axis airfields were also bombed or strafed and, of the total number of German fighters destroyed or damaged in July, approximately 12 were destroyed on the ground during the RAF's attacks.

The fact that more than half of the machines which JG 27 had on strength were actually operational and able to participate in the fighting over the positions at El Alamein was due to the industry and skill of the unit's mechanics. However, in the month's fighting, 27 aircraft from JG 27 alone were listed as totally destroyed and although another 14 were listed as severely damaged, it proved impossible to repair all the damaged aircraft because of the harsh desert conditions and a shortage of spares. Some aircraft were therefore stripped of components to keep others operating, and although the result was that more fighters were able to take to the air, more machines were effectively grounded than official losses suggest. Later, during their advance, Allied troops discovered many Bf 109s abandoned on captured desert airfields simply because they could not be repaired.

Pilot losses were limited in numbers but the quality of the men lost was high. With the already mentioned capture of *Lt. Friedrich Körner*, 2./JG 27 lost a holder of the *Ritterkreuz* with 36 victories. *Lt. Karl Kugelbauer* of 3./JG 27, killed over El Alamein on 8 July, was credited with four claims, while *Oblt. Ernst Klager*, *Staffelführer* of 8./JG 53, captured on 3 July and also mentioned above, had shot down 21 enemy aircraft. *Lt Rudolf Müller* of the same *Staffel* had seven *Abschüsse* but was killed in action near El Alamein by a P-40 on 13 July.

Operations against Malta

At the end of April 1942, Hitler and Mussolini had held a series of meetings during which German and Italian generals discussed the question of Malta. The Italians wanted to mount an air landing operation to capture the island and *Generalfeldmarschall* Albert Kesselring – *Oberbefehlshaber Süd* – was asked to prepare and launch *Unternehmen 'Herakles'*. Although this idea received the support of a number of German commanders, the *Führer*, however, had severe reservations about the ability of the Italians to succeed in what was to be primarily an Italian operation. Nevertheless, certain preparations were made and XI. *Fliegerkorps*, the *Luftwaffe's* parachute and airborne command, began to assemble its troops in Italy.

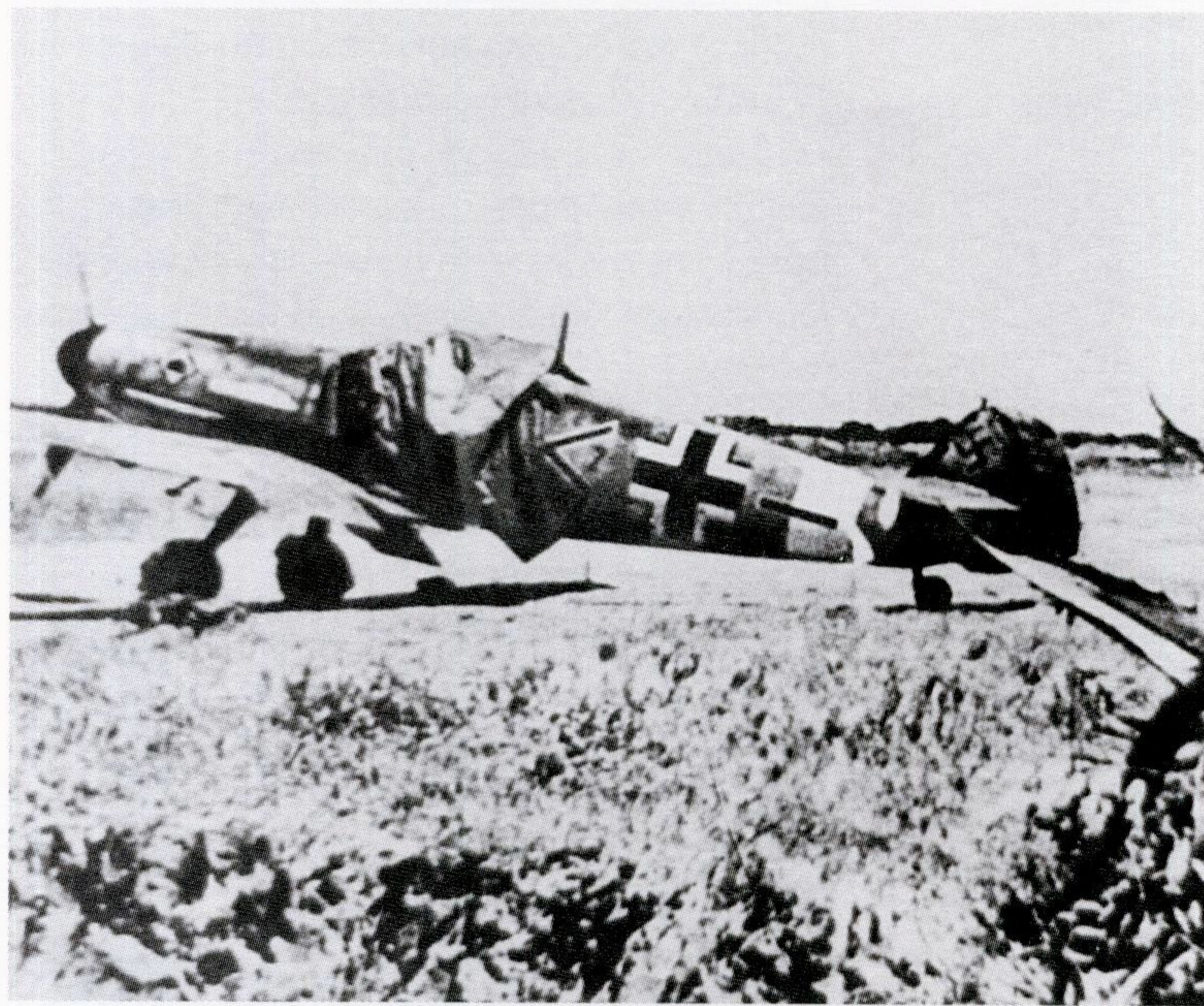
Rommel, however, was more interested in North Africa than in Malta and, wishing to continue his offensive, requested that air units be transferred from Sicily to support him. Since his recent successes seemed to confirm that he would, indeed, secure a victory and that an attack on Malta therefore appeared superfluous, on 21 May Hitler first postponed *'Herakles'* until September, and then, when Rommel captured Tobruk on 21 June, endorsed Rommel's plan to continue to the Nile. As *Luftwaffe* forces were diverted from Malta, the pressure on the island fortress lessened and allowed Allied air and naval forces based there to continue disrupting naval communications and supply transport between Italy and North Africa.

On 1 July Kesselring therefore ordered that Malta was to be subdued by a renewed bombing offensive and assembled a force consisting of the independent KGr. 606 and KGr. 806 plus two *Gruppen* from KG 54 and two from KG 77, all of which were equipped with Ju 88s. These bombers were supported mainly by the fighters of II./JG 53 under *Hptm. Walter Spies*, already based in Sicily and reinforced by I./JG 77 under *Hptm. Heinz Bär* which had been withdrawn from the Russian Front specifically for the renewed attack on Malta. The Italian *Regia Aeronautica* provided 135 fighters and 80 bomber, dive-bomber and torpedo aircraft.

I./JG 77 (formerly I.(*Jagd*)/LG 2 had operated on the Eastern Front from the opening of *'Barbarossa'* and in June 1942 was operating over the Crimea with the rest of the *Geschwader*. On 28

BELOW:

The II./JG 53 was based in Sicily for operations against Malta from May to October 1942. This Bf 109 F of the *Gruppenstab* has 22 victory bars on the rudder and may have been flown by *Lt. Franz Schiess* of *Stab II./JG 53* who claimed his 22nd victory, a Spitfire, on 26 August 1942, at about the time the *Gruppe* was converting to the Bf 109 G-4. The *Stab* markings consisted of a chevron and the numeral '2', both in black thinly outlined in white.



June, almost exactly a year since the opening of the Russian campaign, I./JG 77 began to transfer to the South, moving via Rumania, Bulgaria and Northern Greece to its new airfield in Sicily. The *Gruppe*, however, was not complete as a few of its aircraft, mainly drawn from 1./JG 77, had been diverted to the Rumanian airfield of Mizil in order to reinforce a small detachment which was protecting the valuable oilfield around Ploesti. Rumania, however, was not subjected to many major air attacks, the only serious alert occurring on 12 June 1942 when an attack was made on Ploesti by 13 B-24s of the Halverson Detachment which had taken off from Egypt as part of Operation 'Halpro'. During this attack, the B-24s were engaged by the *Ölschutzstaffel Ploesti*¹ and Lt. Edgar Berres, a pilot from 1./JG 77



LEFT: Lt Armin Köhler of 3./JG 77 seated on the wing of a Bf 109 F-4 trop of Stab./JG 53 in July 1942 when he had 13 victories. He finished the war with 69 victories and was awarded the Ritterkreuz on 7 February 1945.

temporarily attached to the Oilfield Defence *Staffel*, claimed one of the bombers. Although poorly prepared, this American attack is significant in that it marked the USAAF's baptism of fire in Europe.

The first Bf 109 F of I./JG 77 landed at Comiso in Sicily on 5 July and went into action the following day when Fw. Anton Engels was reported missing after being shot down by Malta's anti-aircraft defences. Engels, credited with two victories, had been a veteran of I.(*Jagd*)/LG 2 and had received the nickname of '*Flakwölkchen*', or 'Little Flak Cloud' on account of the fact that he had previously been shot down five times by anti-aircraft guns. For Engels, the sixth time was his last, but other pilots engaged in the renewed battles with the Malta-based Spitfires were more successful and their names will often be mentioned in the following pages. That month, *Oblt.* Siegfried Freytag, *Kapitän* of 1./JG 77, claimed seven victories over Malta, bringing his total on 31 July to 64. *Oblt.* Friedrich Geisshardt, leading 3./JG 77, had 82 victories when he left Russia but had 85 by the end of the month. Several other pilots were also successful: *Ofw.* Walter Brandt of 2./JG 77, also a veteran of I. (*Jagd*)/LG 2, was credited with six Spitfires in July, and Fw. Ottokar Pohl, who had transferred to 1./JG 77 from JG 2 in April 1942, shot down three Spitfires over the island. Although I./JG 77 lost four pilots and seven Bf 109 Fs, the *Gruppe* was able to use workshop facilities on the airfields in Sicily where its damaged aircraft were repaired, so total material losses were less serious than in the desert.

During this period, II./JG 53 was also operating over Malta, escorting Axis bombers attacking the island's airfields and harbours. This *Gruppe*'s pilots claimed 38 Spitfires, the most able fighter pilots being *Oblt.* Gerhard Michalski, *Staffelkapitän* of 4./JG 53 with seven Spitfires, and *Ofw.* Herbert Rollwage of 5./JG 53 who claimed nine Spitfires. The *Gruppe*'s pilot losses were four men killed or missing in action and one PoW. Another pilot, Lt. Hans Jürgen Frodien, who was attached to the *Gruppenstab* and was shot down and killed during an air battle over Malta on 10 July, had been credited with four victories.

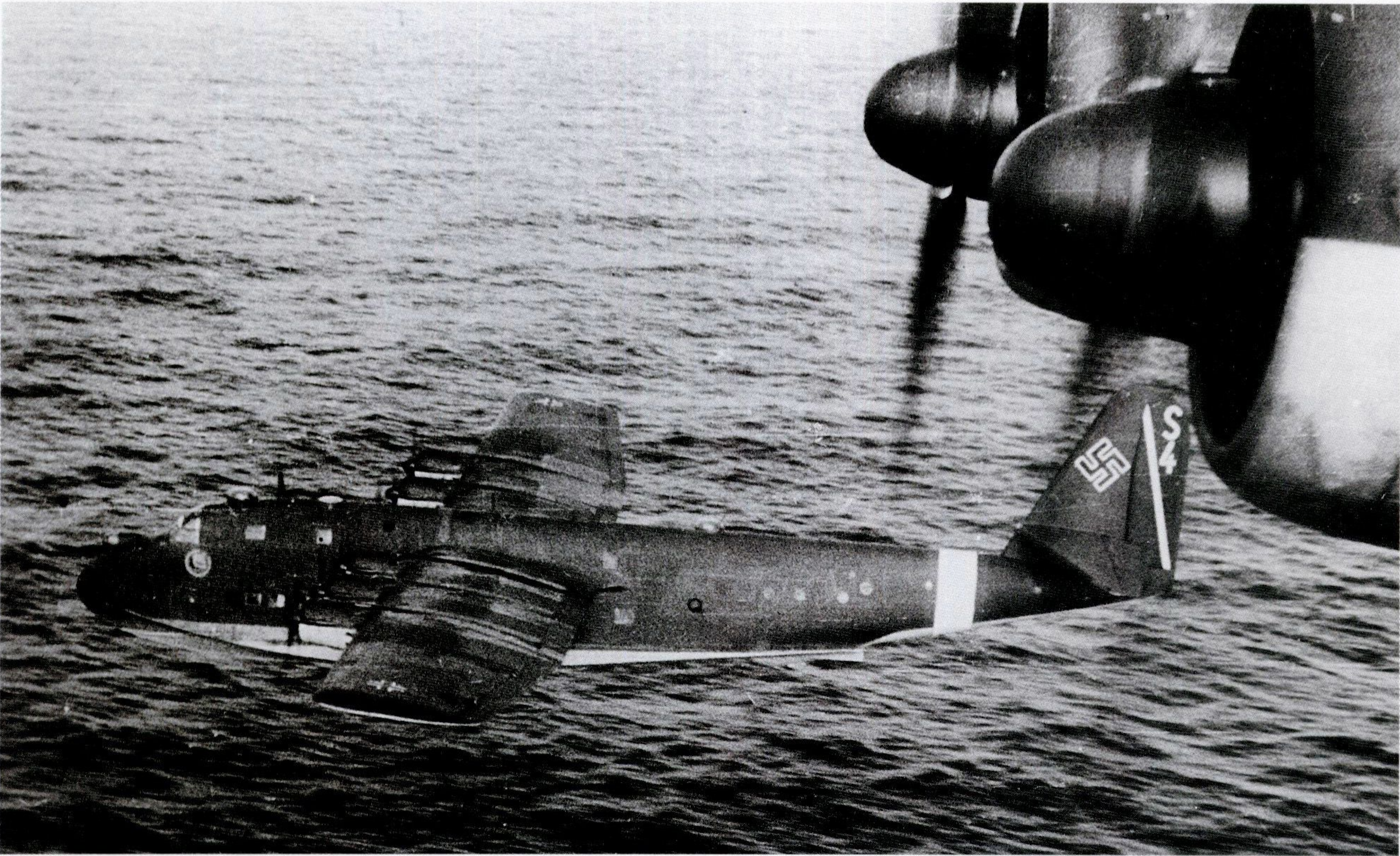
Quiet Before the Storm

When the German and Italian forces came to a halt before Lt. General Claude Auchinlek's excellently prepared defensive positions at El Alamein, both armies had reached a state of exhaustion after a long period of costly fighting and a period of rest, recuperation and consolidation was essential before either was able to resume the offensive.

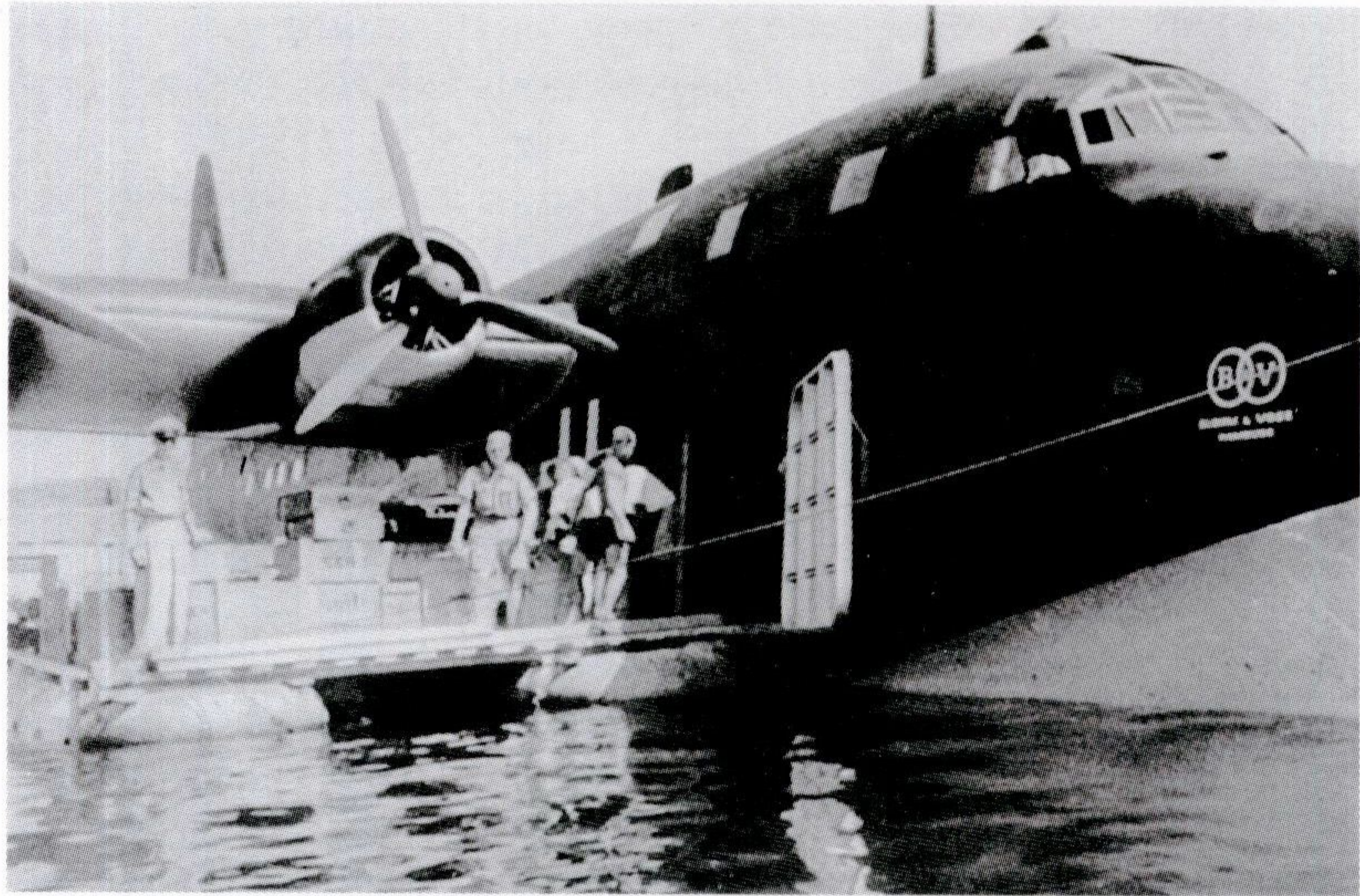
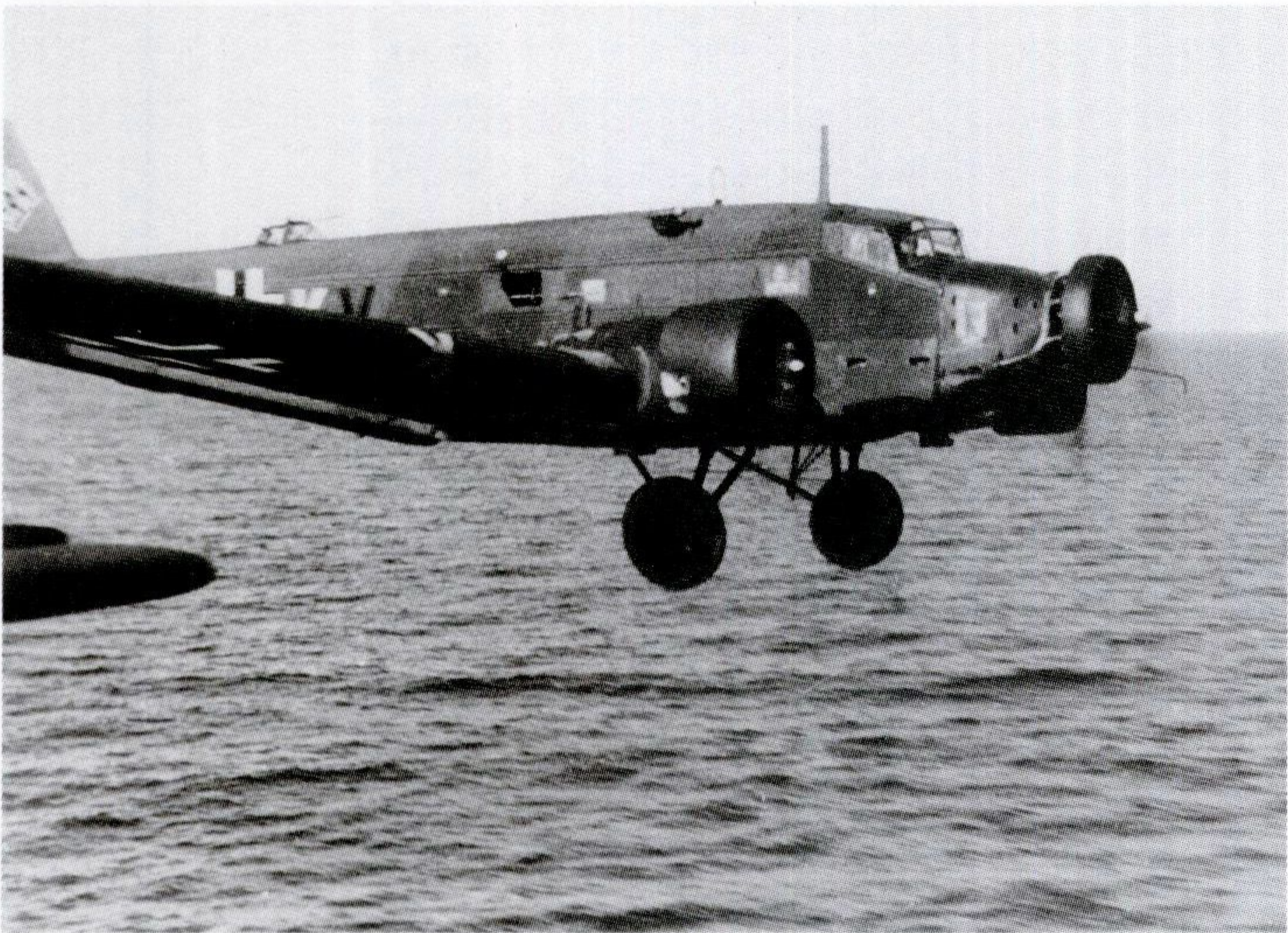
Rommel's troops, tired and short of food, fuel and ammunition, required replacements before they could mount any further offensive operation, yet in this period of stalemate, *Fliegerführer Afrika* and the *Panzerarmee* alike found their efforts to build up supplies for the future hampered by the renewed effectiveness of British anti-shipping operations which, in turn, were due in great measure to the revival of Malta as an air and naval base following the partial raising of the siege in the early Summer.

Rommel appreciated that his correct course of action was to make a strategic retreat, at least to the Egyptian border, thus shortening his supply lines while lengthening those of the Eighth Army, but Hitler and Mussolini would not allow this. Under these conditions, Rommel realised that while he remained inactive the British were making good use of the stalemate and growing stronger while his own position

1. Redesignated I./JG 4 on 10 January 1943.

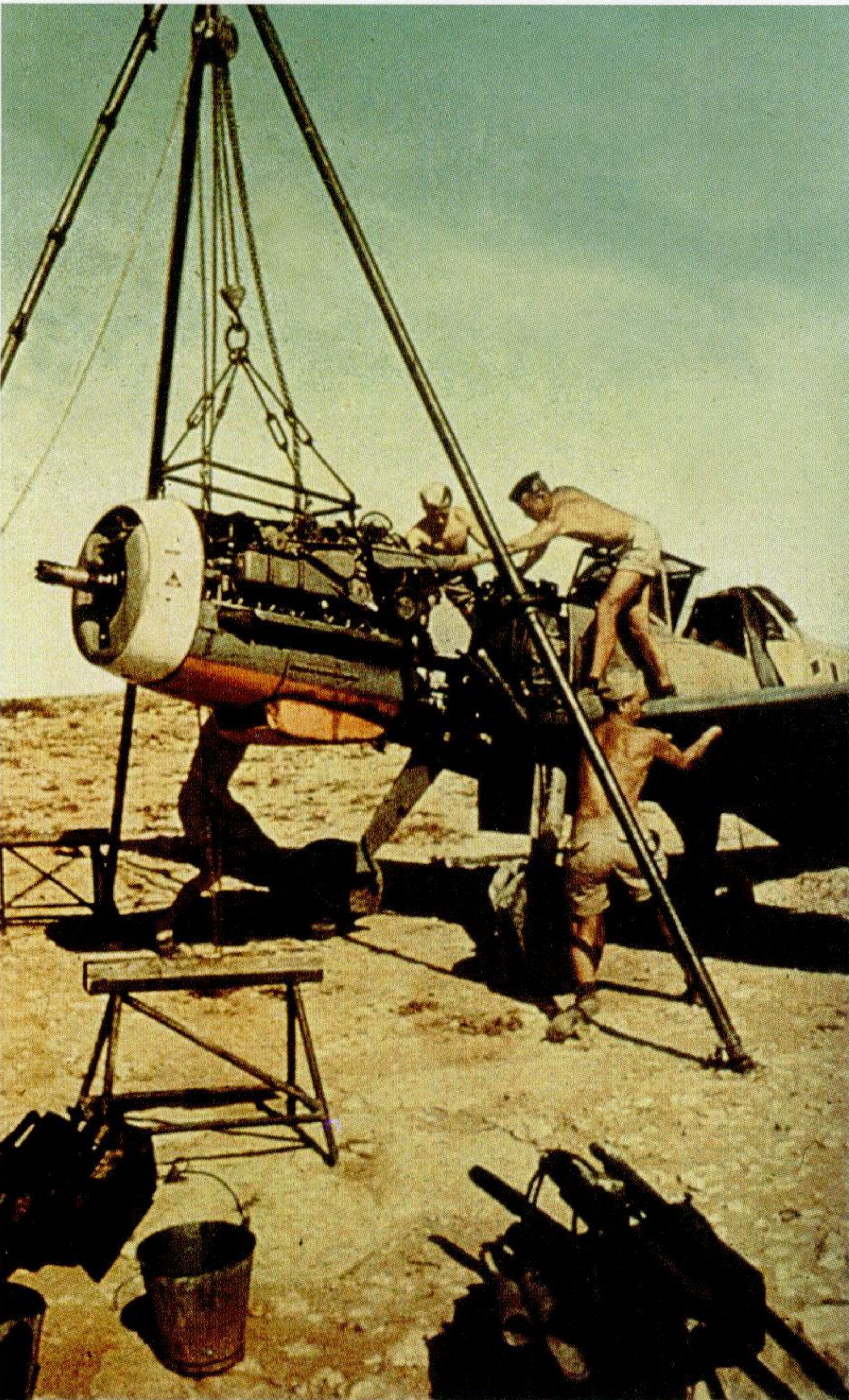


LEFT AND BELOW: The earlier German capture of Tobruk in June 1942 improved conditions for air transport to Rommel's Panzerarmee in Africa as it brought in new landing grounds and provided a harbour suitable for the large Bv 222 flying boats operating from Taranto.

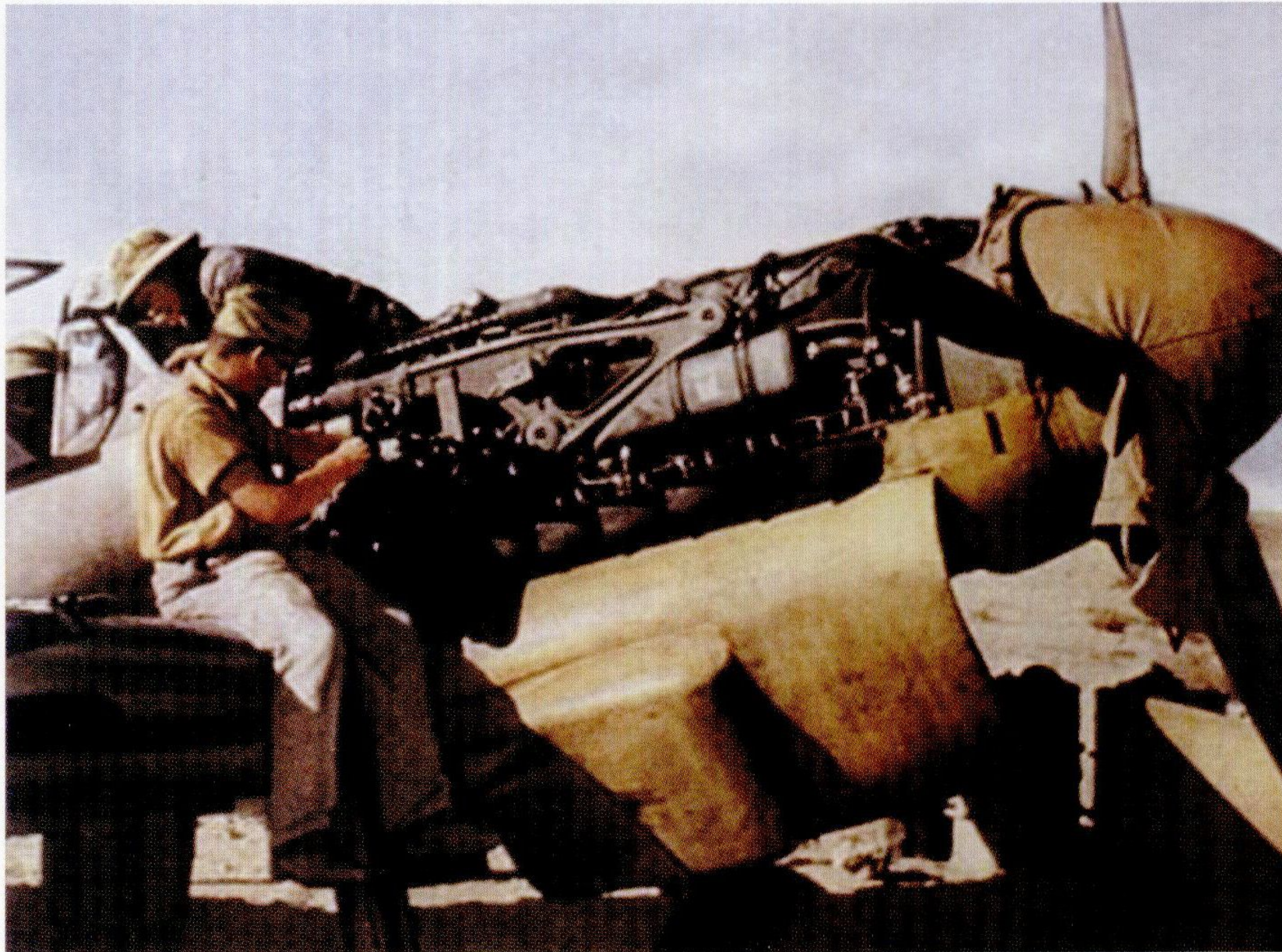


ABOVE AND RIGHT: The problem of adequately supplying Axis forces in North Africa grew more acute as the campaign wore on. As well as sea transport, Ju 52s were employed to fly in fuel and supplies but, by the middle of September 1942, there were no more than 250 Ju 52s available in the Mediterranean and most Gruppen were operationally tired so that serviceability of aircraft and fitness of crews fell accordingly. Eventually, air transport units were reduced to borrowing from each other in order to be able to fly the aircraft they had, but flying conditions were difficult and fighter protection was inadequate. At the same time, fuel for both mechanical transport and for Ju 52s was in such short supply that eventually the air transport system was disrupted and it became impossible to supply fuel for Rommel's tanks because there was no petrol for the Ju 52s. By October, air transport in the Mediterranean area, already pressed to the limit to supply Rommel, lacked aircraft, crews, fuel and fighter protection and was hardly in a position therefore to redouble its efforts when the Eighth Army went over to the offensive on 23 October.





LEFT AND BELOW: Aircraft of JG 27 undergoing open-air maintenance in North Africa. Showing up well in both photographs are the yellow undersides to the engine cowling and the nature of the Sandgelb 79 uppersurface camouflage colour. Just visible on the Bf 109 F-4 (*LEFT*) having its engine changed are Stab markings consisting of a chevron and two vertical bars, all in black edged in white. Note also the dust cover over the spinner on the aircraft shown (*BELOW*).



LEFT: A member of I./JG 27's ground staff putting the finishing touches to the Gruppe's badge on the upper cowling of one of the unit's aircraft. Note again the pale tone of the RLM 79.

remained unaltered. It was therefore absolutely necessary to attack and advance or accept inevitable eventual defeat. He therefore planned to strike a limited blow at Eighth Army to take possession of the territory around Alexandria and Cairo. It was to open at 23.00 hrs on 30 August.

Meanwhile, during the following enforced lull, August continued to be relatively quiet. At the beginning of the month I./JG 27 had already been reinforced with new or repaired aircraft arriving from rear bases in Italy and possessed 24 operational Bf 109 F-4 *trops*. The *Gruppe* recorded a total of 22 victories in August, all except a Blenheim, a Boston and a Beaufighter being fighters. Three of these victories were claimed on 31 August by *Oblt.* Hans-Joachim Marseille, *Staffelkapitän* of 3./JG 27, who had returned to the desert after a long period of leave in Germany following the award of the Swords. The *Gruppe* suffered no losses in pilots and only four of its aircraft were damaged, two of them during a bombing attack on Turbiya airfield where the unit was stationed for a short time.

Also with 24 operational aircraft on strength at the beginning of August was II./JG 27. This *Gruppe* was most active during the month, its pilots claiming no fewer than 82 enemy fighters and one Bombay transport destroyed. Of these, an astonishing 65 victories were claimed by 4./JG 27 alone. One of this *Staffel's* most successful pilots was *Ofw.* Erwin Sawallisch, a veteran of the Legion Condor in Spain who in 1939-1940 had flown with 4./JG 77 before being transferred into 4./JG 27 in August 1941. On 3 August 1942 he shot down his 16th victim and by the 16th had claimed his 33rd *Abschuss*. Three days later, he was himself reported lost over the sea, his exact fate being unknown. Also in 4./JG 27,



ABOVE: This British AEC Armoured Command Vehicle (LP) was one of three originally attached to the British 2nd Armoured Division. They were captured by the Afrika Korps on the outskirts of Mechili in April 1941 and two of these vehicles were subsequently used by Rommel and his staff. Although he referred to them as "Mammute", or "Mammoths", they were eventually given the names "Max" and "Moritz", the latter being shown here with its name in white on the left front. The bodies of these 4 X 4 vehicles were constructed from 12 mm armour plate mounted on steel frames and each weighed nearly 12 tons. All three survived the North African campaign and were only recaptured in May 1943 when they were found deserted in the Cap Bon area after the final surrender.

Ofw. Karl-Heinz Bendert increased his tally from 18 *Luftsiege* at the beginning of the month to 41, while *Ofw.* Franz Stigler accounted for 12, increasing his tally at the end of the month to 17. *Oblt.* Ferdinand Vögl destroyed a Hurricane as his 21st victory on 7 August and on the 19th he shot down a Spitfire as his 30th. In return for these successes, only one pilot of II./JG 27, *Ofw.* Sawallisch, was killed, but two others were captured. In addition, eight aircraft were completely destroyed and a few others damaged, three being the result of bombing and strafing attacks carried out against the *Gruppe's* airfield at Quotaifiya on 8 August.

One significant aerial victory occurred on 7 August when *Uffz.* Bernd Schneider of 5./JG 27 shot down a Bombay transport aircraft. This machine had taken off from Burg el Arab bound for LG 90 at the front and had aboard as a passenger the new-appointed commander of Eighth Army and veteran of the desert war, Lt. General William Gott. Normally, for safety reasons, the aircraft would have flown at low level, but on this occasion an engine overheated and the pilot climbed to 500 feet to cool it down. The aircraft was then intercepted by two Bf 109s from 5./JG 27 and shot down by *Uffz.* Schneider. The crew and one passenger survived, but Gott and other officers travelling as passengers were

BELOW: In the stalemate of August 1942, the British, with their supply line secure, nevertheless needed time in which to build up for an offensive. For Rommel, no ship bringing supplies across the Mediterranean was safe from the attentions of the British and even the supplies which did reach North Africa were subjected to ceaseless attack on their way to the front. While Rommel realised that the correct course of action was to order a strategic retreat, yielding the Allies nothing but useless desert and inflicting on them the same burden of lengthy communications, Hitler and Mussolini opposed such a move and left Rommel with the alternatives of attacking or facing inevitable defeat. Following months of physical and mental strain in a trying climate, these new anxieties caused Rommel's health to break down. On 25 September 1942, he was ordered home for medical treatment but, following Eighth Army's attack at El Alamein, he was recalled and resumed command on 25 October. In this photograph of Rommel, seated centre, in conference with German and Italian officers, the strain is clearly visible.



RIGHT: During 1942, the air defence of Malta was sustained by the arrival of a total of 367 Spitfires which were flown off aircraft carriers. HMS Eagle made nine separate voyages between March and July, and in this photograph, a Spitfire V, carrying a 90 gallon ferry tank beneath the fuselage and with a Vokes tropical filter fitted under the nose, is taking off from HMS Eagle's flight deck. On her final voyage, Eagle's task was convoy protection and she carried only Sea Hurricanes and Swordfish.

killed in the crash-landing. The unfortunate Lt. General was subsequently replaced by Lt. General Bernard Montgomery.

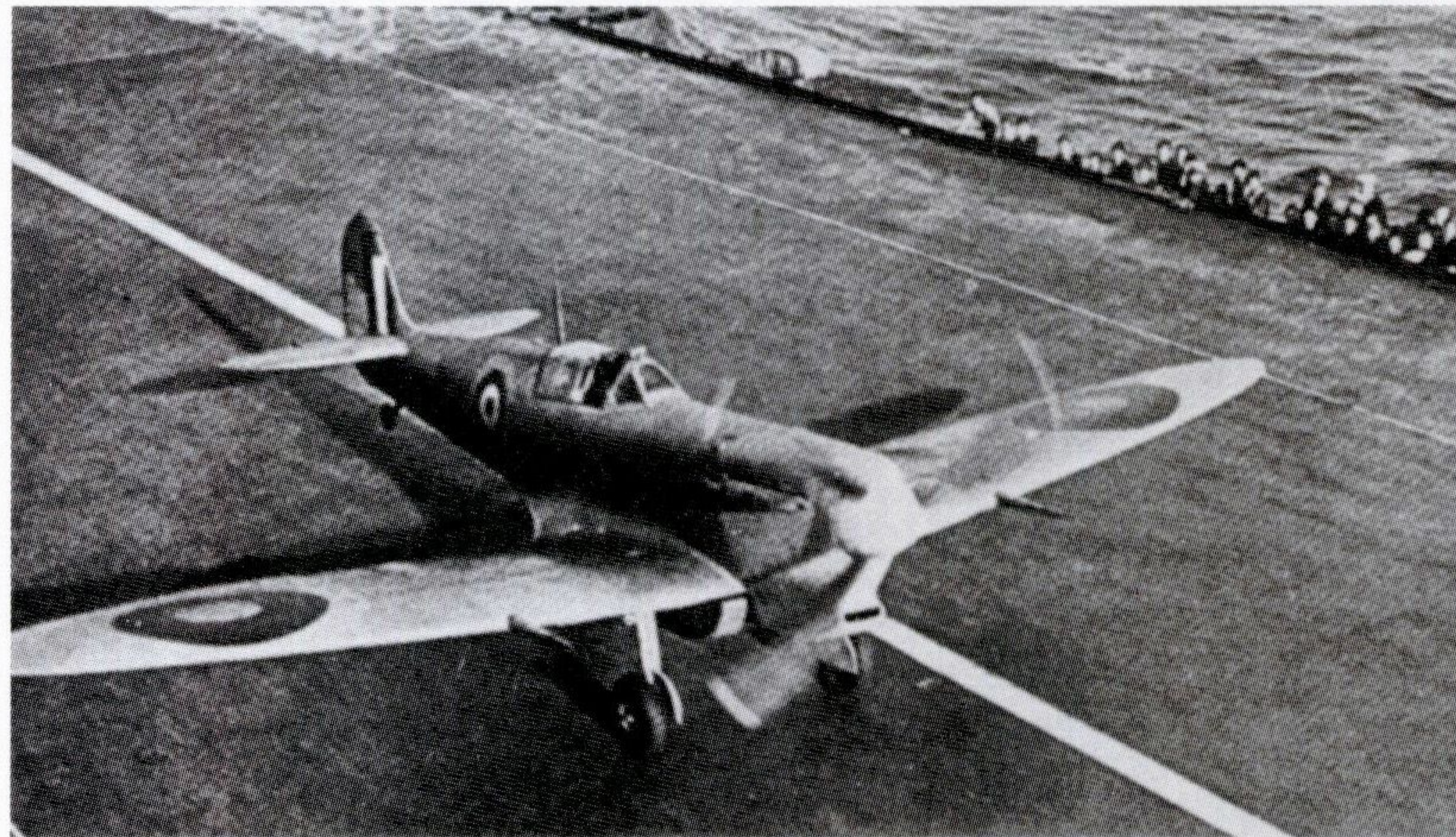
Although assembling 30 operational Bf 109 Fs on 1 August, III./JG 27 again proved to be the most unfortunate *Gruppe*, its pilots claiming just three P-40s in the month for the loss of ten of its own aircraft. Although pilot losses were low, with one killed and another taken as a PoW, they were serious in that the pilot killed was *Oblt.* Hermann Tangerding, *Staffelkapitän* of 7./JG 27, who was shot down by anti-aircraft guns south of El Alamein on the 31st. He had been credited with 11 victories.

Also heavily committed over the El Alamein front was III./JG 53, but its operations remained largely unsuccessful. Although the *Gruppe's* pilots claimed five fighter aircraft and two Beaufighters, the unit lost two pilots killed and two taken prisoner, one of the latter being *Ofw.* Josef Kronschnabel of 9./JG 53 who was shot down by anti-aircraft fire and captured near El Alamein shortly after accounting for his 14th victory. Six Bf 109 F *trops* were totally destroyed and another six seriously damaged.

An important event for German forces in Africa, and particularly for the German fighter units, was the arrival in August of significant numbers of American aircraft. Apart from US P-40s, seen for the first time over the desert in mid-August, squadrons of new B-24 Liberator and B-25 Mitchell aircraft also arrived. Soon, these bombers, heavily escorted by fighter formations, began to attack the Axis lines, but *Fliegerführer Afrika* possessed only four *Jagdgruppen* with which to oppose this threat. With the arrival of the Bf 109 fighter-bomber unit III./ZG 1 from the Russian Front, *Fliegerführer Afrika* could at least reinforce his ground-attack forces and by detaching the *Jabo Staffeln* 10./JG 27 and 10./JG 53 from their parent units, formed a new unit which became known as *Jabo-Gruppe Afrika*.

Meanwhile, operating from their airfields in Sicily, I./JG 77 and II./JG 53 tried to maintain the pressure on Malta, where the island's situation was again desperate. Supply convoys had suffered such heavy losses that they had been suspended, but by August it was clear that unless food and fuel reached the island, it would fall. A relief convoy in August was therefore essential and 14 fast, modern merchant ships together with a powerful escort of three aircraft carriers and modern cruisers and destroyers were assembled to fight the convoy through from Gibraltar. At the same time, the air forces on Malta were to be strongly reinforced for the operation, which was given the codename '*Pedestal*', and a fourth carrier, HMS *Furious*, was loaded with 38 Spitfires to reinforce the island's defences and added to the convoy.

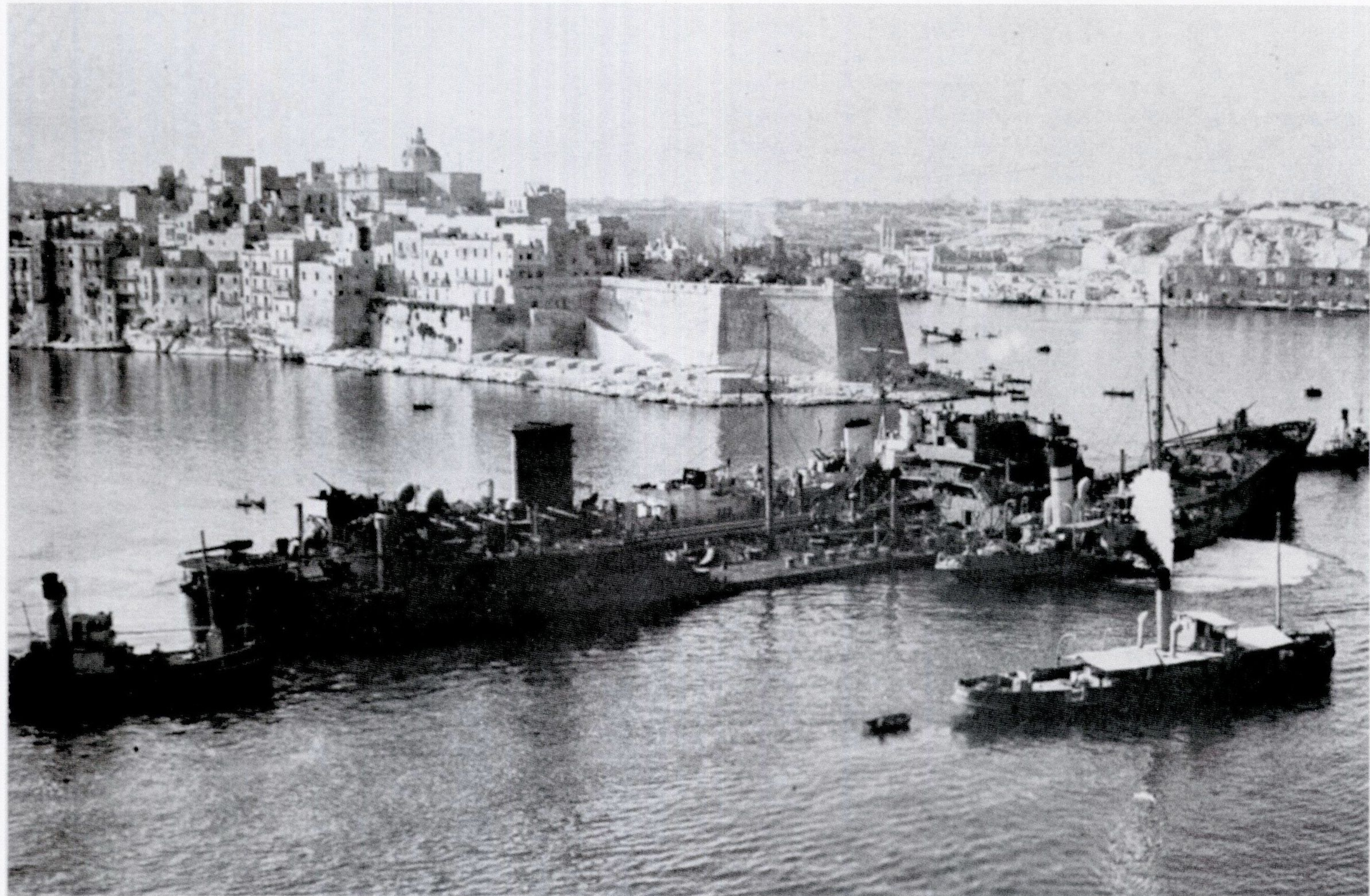
From intercepted radio messages, the Italians were aware well in advance that an important British operation was impending and, having correctly guessed its nature, a huge force of German and Italian bombers, dive-bombers and torpedo aircraft had already been assembled in Sardinia and Sicily when, on 11 August, a German reconnaissance aircraft detected the convoy. That afternoon, the *Furious* flew off



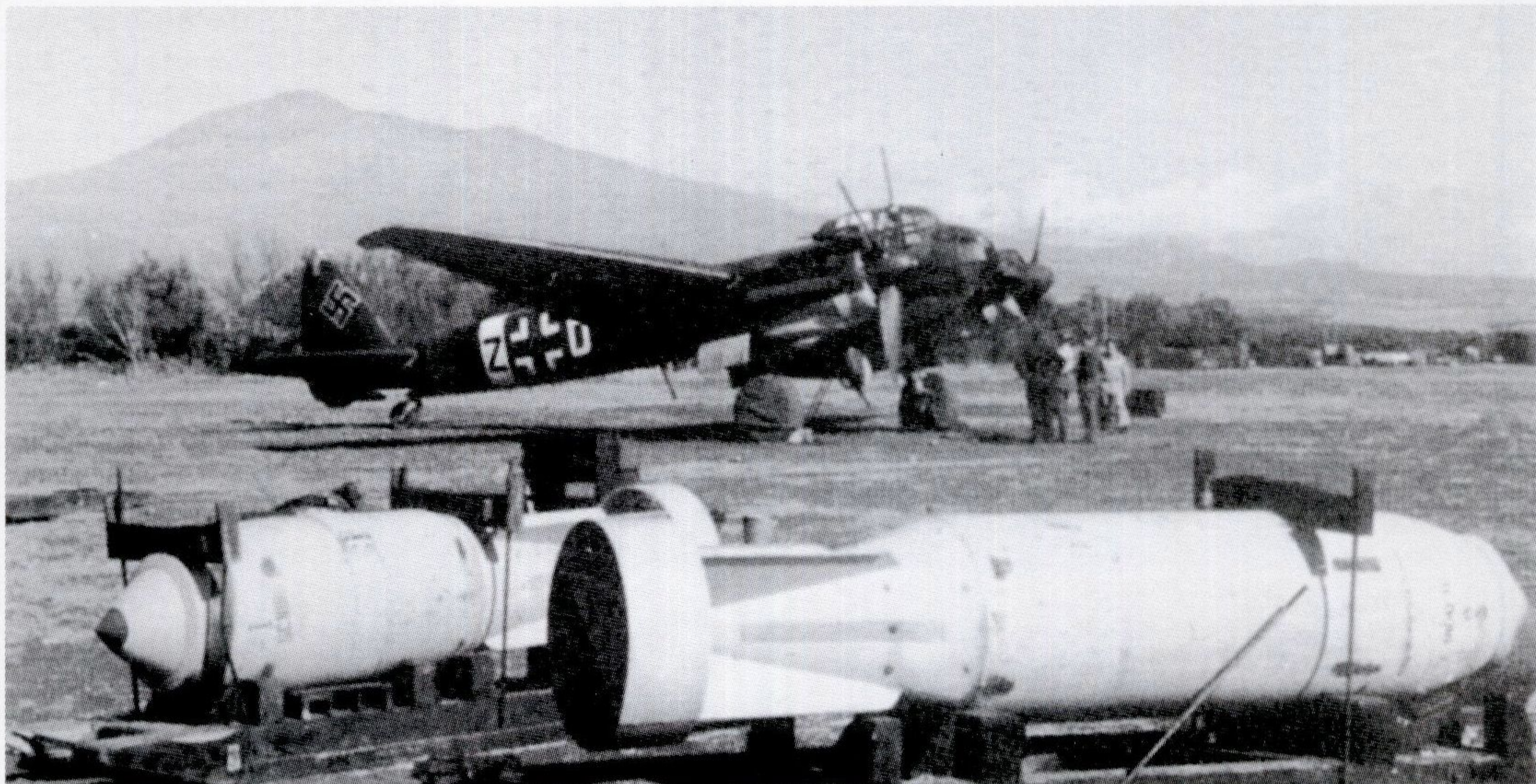
LEFT: When the convoy of 14 merchant ships and its fleet escort comprising '*Pedestal*' was first detected, a series of ambushes was set across its likely course. The first included nine submarines spread out north of Algiers and U-73 found itself exactly in the convoy's path. At noon on 11 August 1942, four torpedoes hit the aircraft carrier HMS Eagle, which sank within eight minutes, taking 200 of her crew with her.

her aircraft to Malta and turned back, but another aircraft carrier, the *Eagle*, was torpedoed and sunk by the German U-boat U-73. During the evening, the remaining vessels were heavily attacked by Ju 87s, Ju 88s and Italian aircraft, but suffered no further losses. Meanwhile, the Bf 109 Fs of the two *Gruppen* on Sicily, supported by a handful of Italian fighters, had to provide these forces with fighter escort. Fighters were temporarily based on Pantelleria to shorten the distance they would have to fly, but in the event there were no aerial battles and no fighter losses were reported over the convoy.

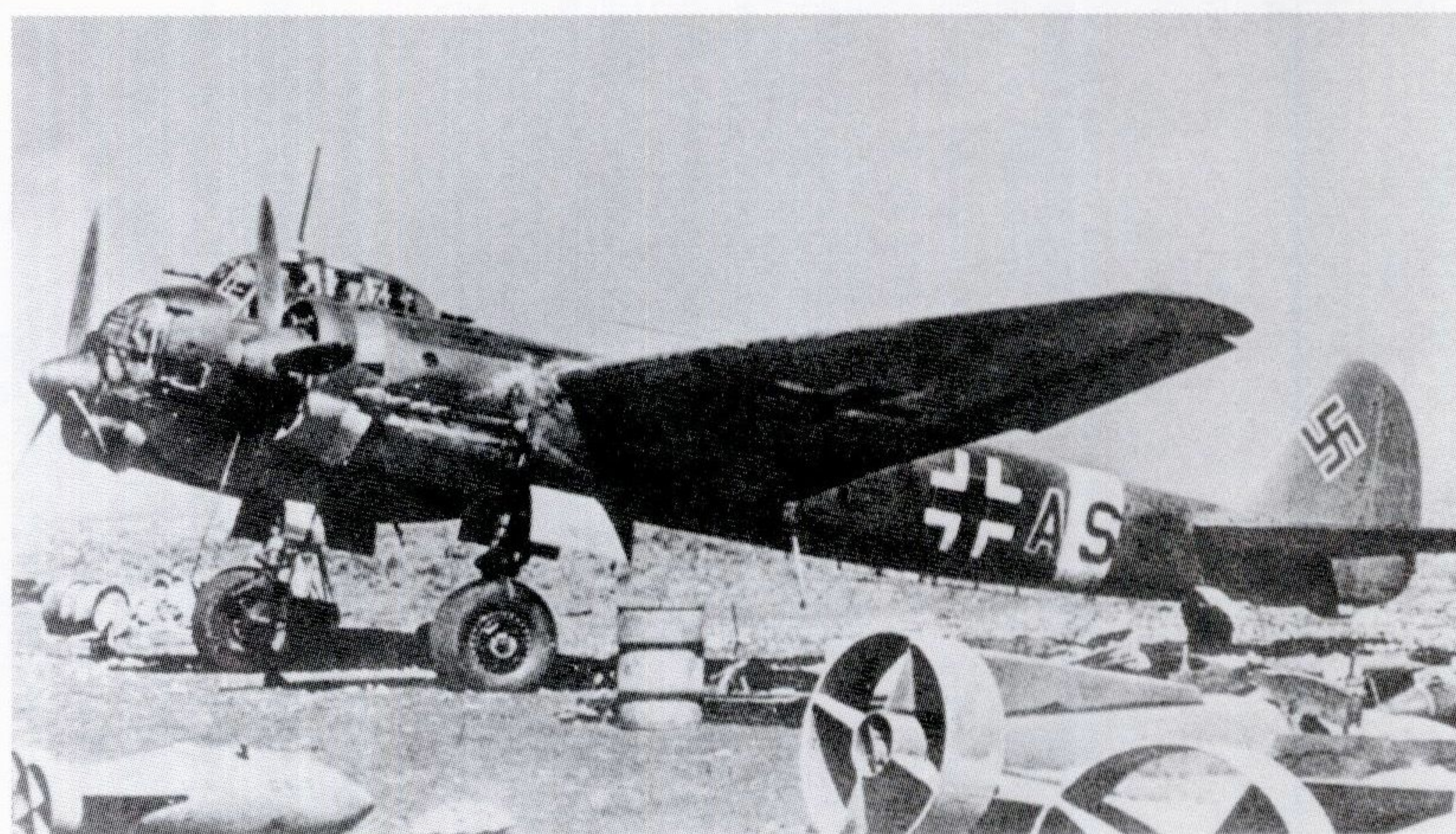
Meanwhile, during the fierce sea and air battles, many ships were sunk or damaged before the last ship entered Malta's Valletta harbour. The operation had cost the escort one aircraft carrier, two cruisers and a destroyer sunk, with a further aircraft carrier and two cruisers severely damaged. In addition, nine of the original 14 merchant ships were sunk, leaving only five to unload their valuable



ABOVE: The large tanker Ohio became the most famous vessel of Operation 'Pedestal'. Although American owned, she was chartered by the British Ministry of War Transport and was commanded and manned by British seamen. Her cargo consisted of 11,500 tons of kerosene and oil-fuel, as vital to Malta's survival as the foodstuffs carried by the other 13 freighters which took part in the operation. Following the sinking of HMS *Eagle*, attacks by aircraft, surface vessels and submarines sank nine merchantmen, two cruisers and a destroyer, while another aircraft carrier and two cruisers were damaged. On 12 August the Ohio survived a torpedo attack which tore a 24 ft by 23 ft hole in her side and set her on fire. These fires were extinguished and the crippled tanker limped on, but burning debris from an exploding freighter then set her cargo of kerosene on fire and this was only extinguished with difficulty. On the 13th, the Ohio was struck by parts of a crashing Ju 87 followed by near misses by six bombs which stopped her engines and she was temporarily abandoned. There then began a long struggle to take the huge, unwieldy and deeply laden tanker in tow, and although further near misses increased the damage and flooding, she was slowly got under way again. Hardly had this been achieved than the tanker again came under air attack, one bomb falling close under her stern while another exploded in her engine room. Once again, the crew was taken off, but by the morning of 14 August the Ohio, lashed to two destroyers and towed by a minesweeper, was moving again. In another air attack, the vessel was holed yet again by a 1,000 lb bomb which exploded under the stern but, on the 15th, the slowly sinking tanker was finally brought into Malta's Valletta harbour and 10,000 tons of her cargo was saved. Fine seamanship, endurance and a persistence to effect a succession of damage repairs long after all hope seemed to have been lost, made the story of the Ohio an epic of the sea. In this photograph, the Ohio, well down in the water, lies in Valletta's Grand Harbour at the end of her voyage.



In July 1942, for a renewed bombing offensive against Malta, Kesselring assembled a force of six Ju 88 Gruppen which comprised KGr. 606, KGr. 806, two Gruppen from KG 54 (BELOW) and two from KG 77 (RIGHT). These photographs show ground staff preparing aircraft for another mission.



cargos, but this was enough to enable Malta to survive and even strike back. Particularly valuable was the aviation fuel aboard the tanker *Ohio*, for this allowed the aerial defence of the island to continue.

Towards the end of the month, a further 32 Spitfires were added to the island's defences, increasing the RAF's fighter strength to the most it had ever been. Nevertheless, pilots of II./JG 53 claimed a total of seven Spitfires destroyed, four of them by *Oblt.* Michalski and one by *Ofw.* Rollwage. Most of the *Gruppe's* losses at that time, amounting to 12 aircraft destroyed or damaged, were due to flying accidents, although two aircraft were lost on the 27th when Comiso airfield was bombed and the *Gruppe* also lost one pilot killed and one captured during air operations over Malta. At the end of the month, II./JG 53 received reinforcements in the form of its first Bf 109 G-2.

Also operating in support of the Sicily-based bomber units attacking Malta was I./JG 77. *Oblt.* Siegfried Freytag of this *Gruppe* claimed three victories while operating over Malta, later earning himself the nickname: '*Der Löwe von Malta*', 'The Lion of Malta'. *Ofw.* Walter Brandt also added three fighters to his score, bringing the *Gruppe's* total claims for the month to 15 in return for surprisingly light losses, most of the seven aircraft damaged being reparable. The only pilot loss was *Fw.* Hugo Langer of 2./JG 77 who crashed at Pantelleria on 13 August during escort missions for the bombers attacking the '*Pedestal*' convoy.

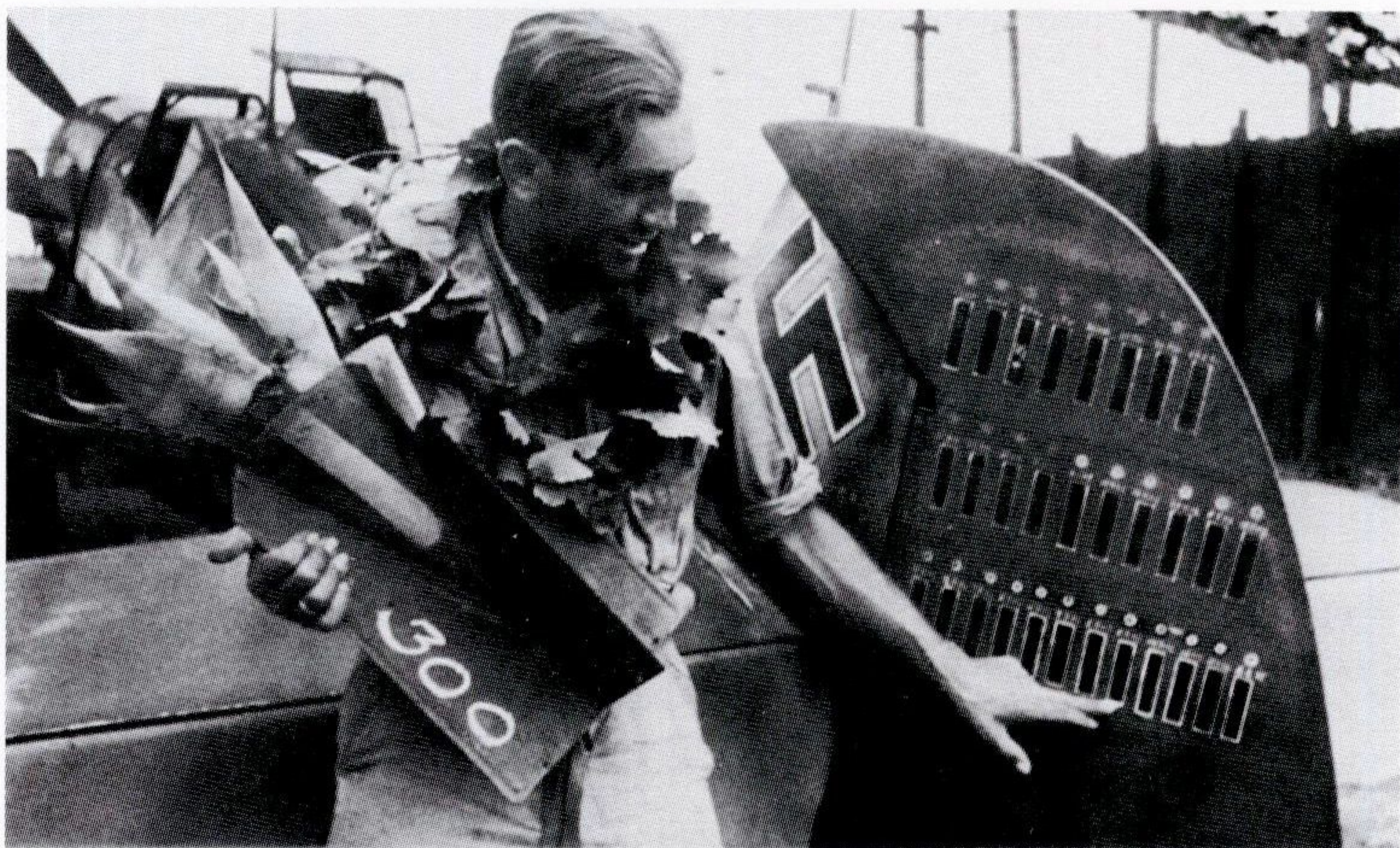
"By day the Luftwaffe attacks in raiding force, varying from three to five aircraft. The average is five Ju 88s with, say, twice that number of yellow-nosed Me 109 fighter escort. If the sky is cloudy, the Luftwaffe has a good shield to cover its movement. Flying at a great height, they keep crossing the island at half-hourly intervals, searching for the gaps in the clouds through which to release their bombs. [...] Occasionally bomb-carrying Me 109s swoop from a great height and let go their bombs."

Contemporary account by a British war correspondent on Malta, August 1942

ABOVE: For most of September 1942, the Ju 88 Gruppen of II. and X. Fliegerkorps were engaged on long convoy patrols which, while routine work, were tiring for the crews. On the evening of 28 September 1942, Kesselring issued an order mentioning the great signs of fatigue evident in the Ju 88 crews and, while calling for a reduction in their tasks, ordered that any daylight attacks were to be carried out only by fighter-bombers. This Ju 88 belonged to LG 1 which had also taken part in the air operations against Malta.



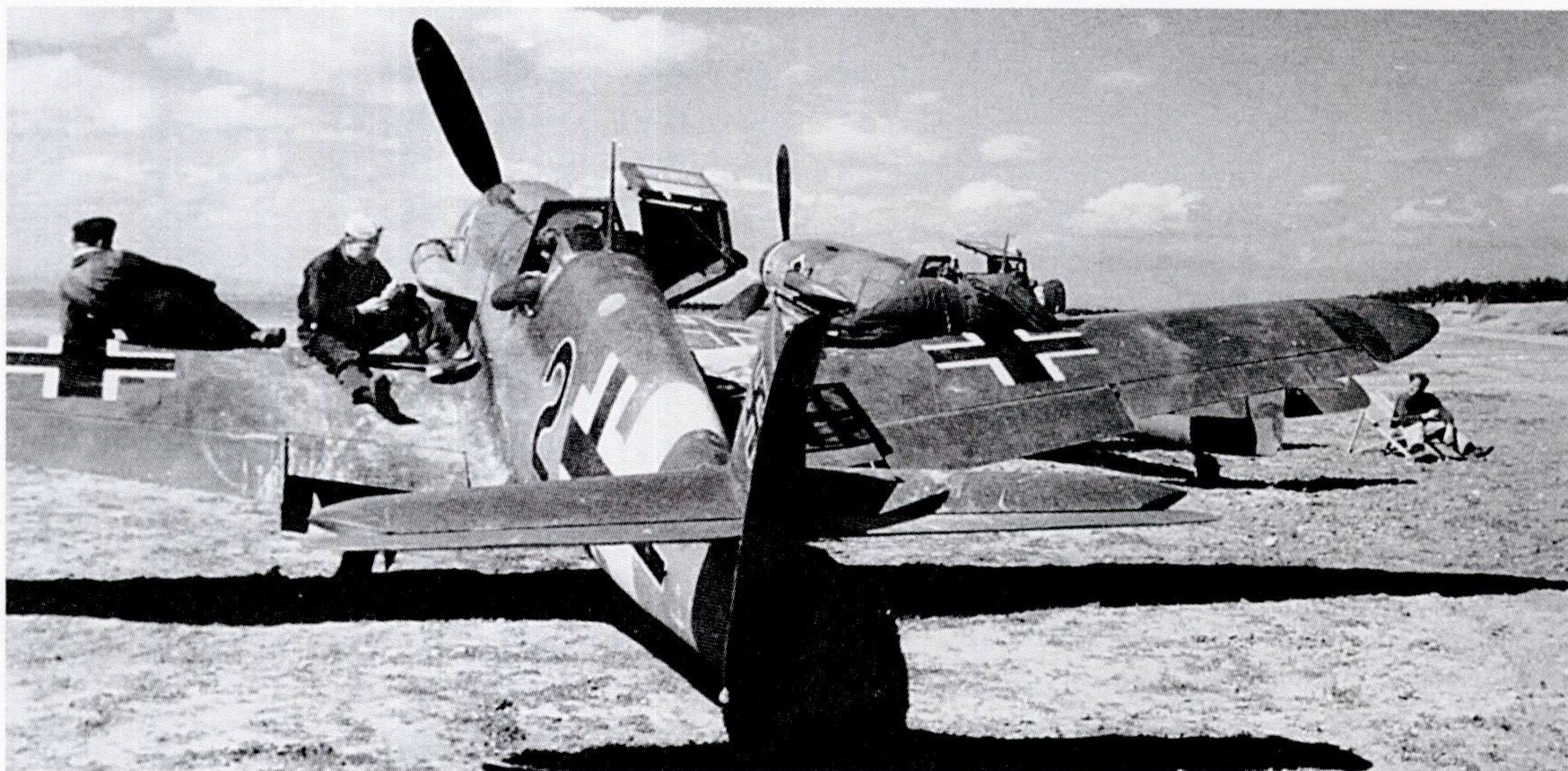
LEFT AND BELOW: To commemorate his 300th war flight on 8 August 1942, Ofw. Rollwage of 5./JG 53 received a wreath and cactus, the latter presented in a vase created from the tail section of a bomb. At this time, 5./JG 53 was operating from Sicily against the island of Malta and on the same day, Rollwage shot down a Spitfire off La Valletta as his 29th victory although, as frequently happened, the markings on the rudder of his 'Black 2' include some claims which at the time were unconfirmed and already shows 30 victory bars.



Messerschmitt Bf 109 F-4 'Black 2' flown by Ofw. Herbert Rollwage of 5./JG 53, Sicily, 8 August 1942

No photographs have been traced which show a complete view of Ofw. Rollwage's aircraft in August 1942 but detail views confirm the main camouflage was almost certainly a 74/75/76 scheme with a white fuselage band broad enough to accommodate the full length of the horizontal II. Gruppe bar. The 'Pik As' badge of JG 53 appeared on both sides of the nose and the aircraft number and Gruppe bar were both black, thinly edged in white. Although a photograph of the aircraft's nose is not available, most pictures taken in the Summer of 1942 show that the spinners on JG 53's aircraft were Green 70 with a white segment and that the panel under the engine was yellow. The aircraft is therefore depicted accordingly in this profile.

RIGHT: A later photograph, taken at La Marsa in Tunisia, showing two Bf 109 G-2s of 5./JG 53's Alarm Rotte. The nearest machine, 'Black 2', was flown by Ofw. Herbert Rollwage and appears to have been camouflaged in a well-worn 74/75/76 scheme.

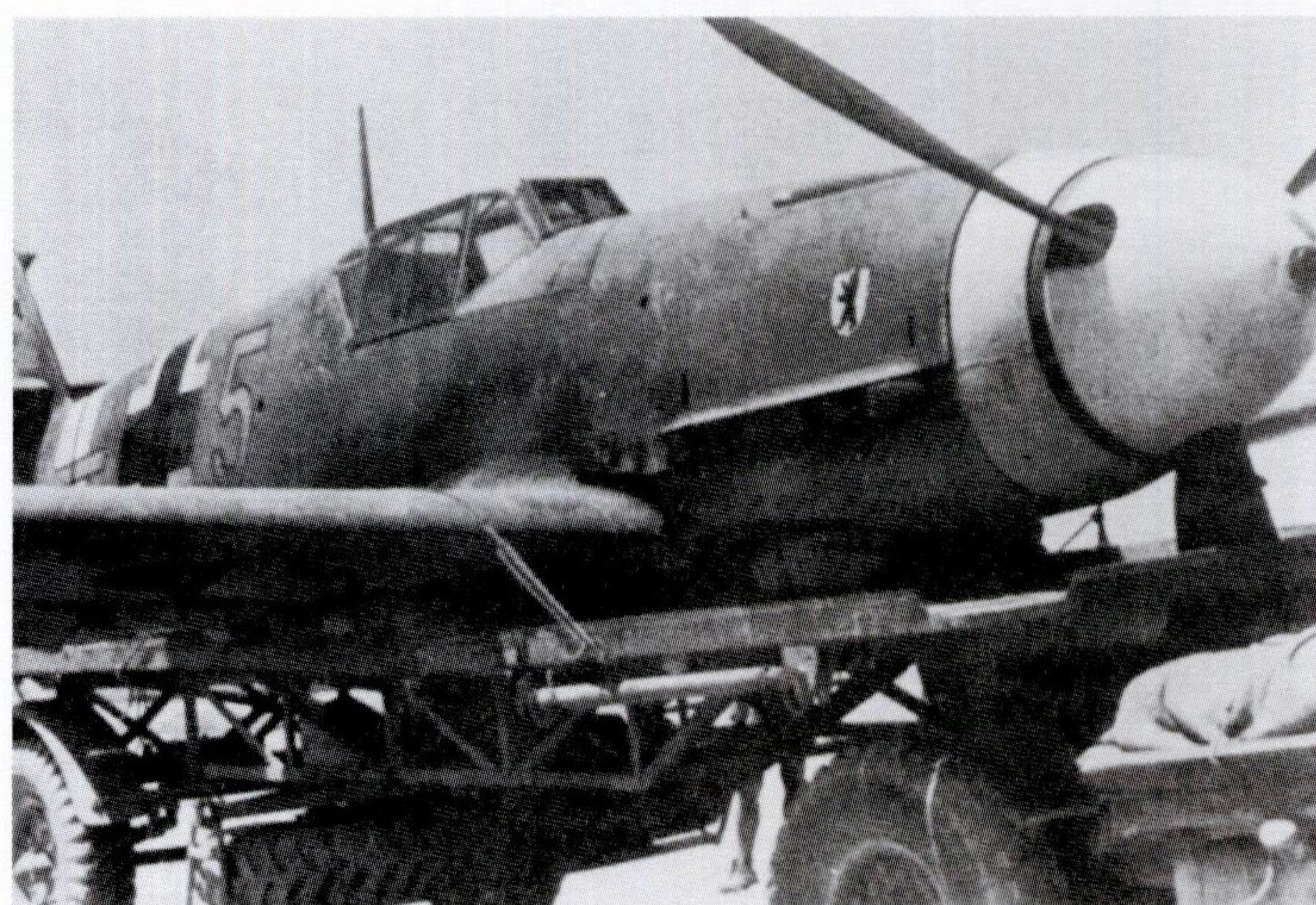
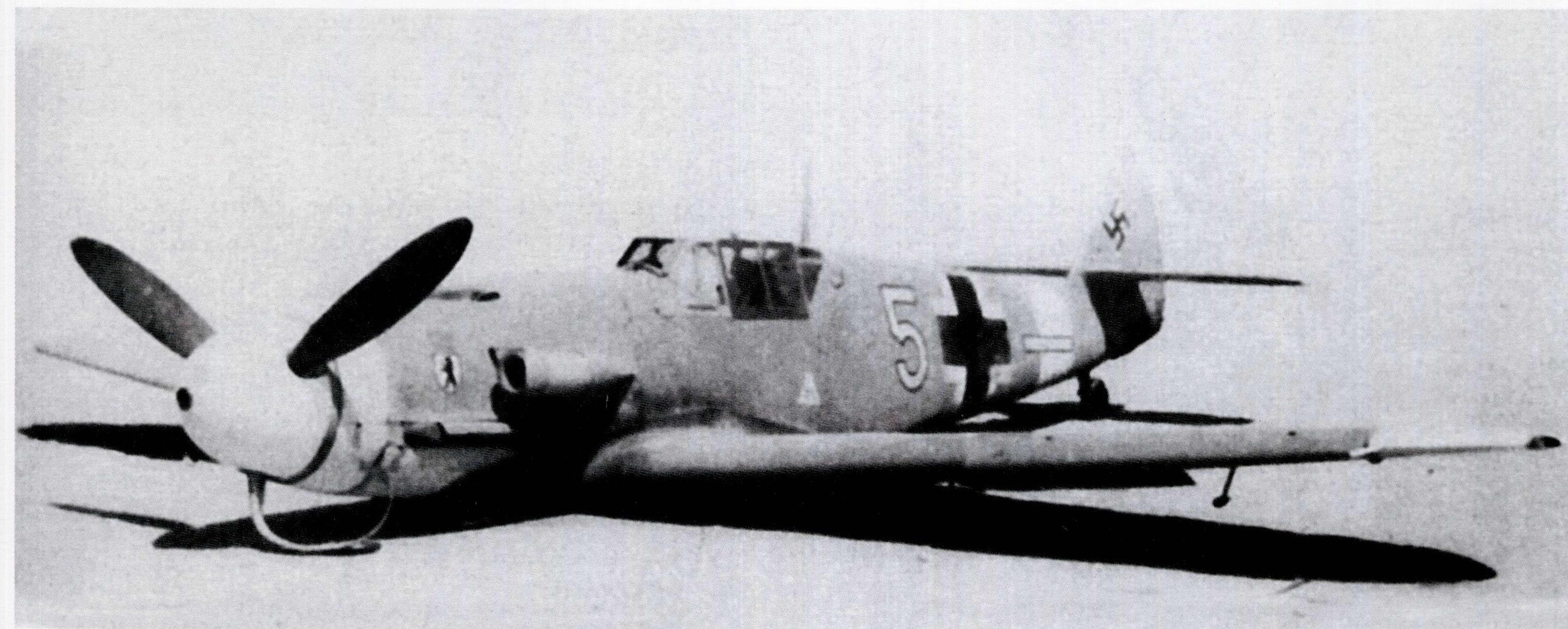


The 'Berlin Bear' badge
of II./JG 27

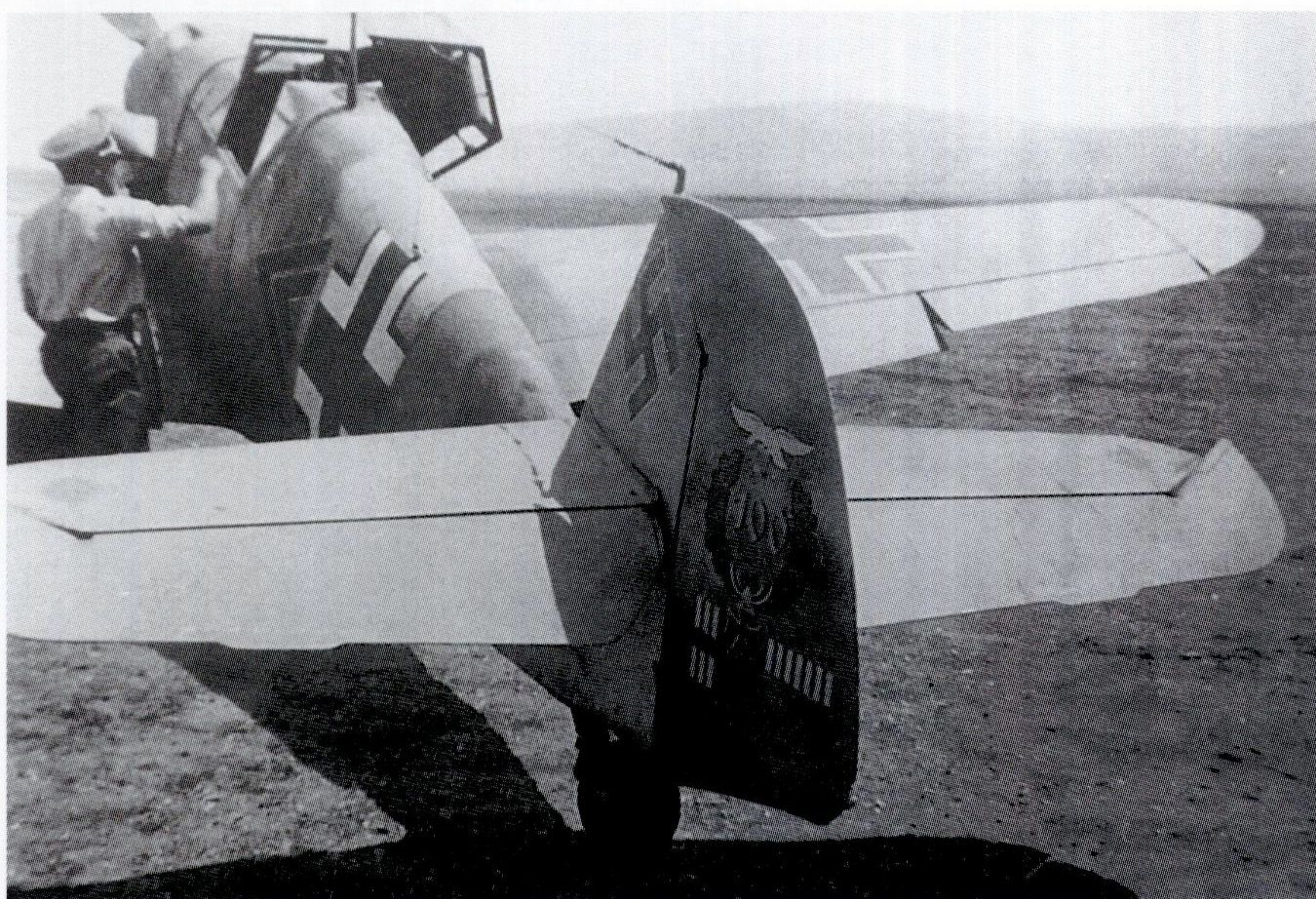


Messerschmitt Bf 109 F-4 trop 'Yellow 5' flown by Lt. Gerhard Mix of 6./JG 27, August 1942

The camouflage on this aircraft was a perfectly standard mid-demarcation 78/79 scheme. The theatre and recognition markings were similarly standard, comprising a white nose, except for the spinner backplate which remained Green 70, white wingtips and fuselage band and a yellow panel under the nose. The 'Berlin Bear' badge of II./JG 27 appeared on both sides of the engine cowling and an unusual feature of this machine was the proportions of the fuselage cross which are not standard but have been seen on a number of Bf 109 Es and Fs operating in the Western Desert.

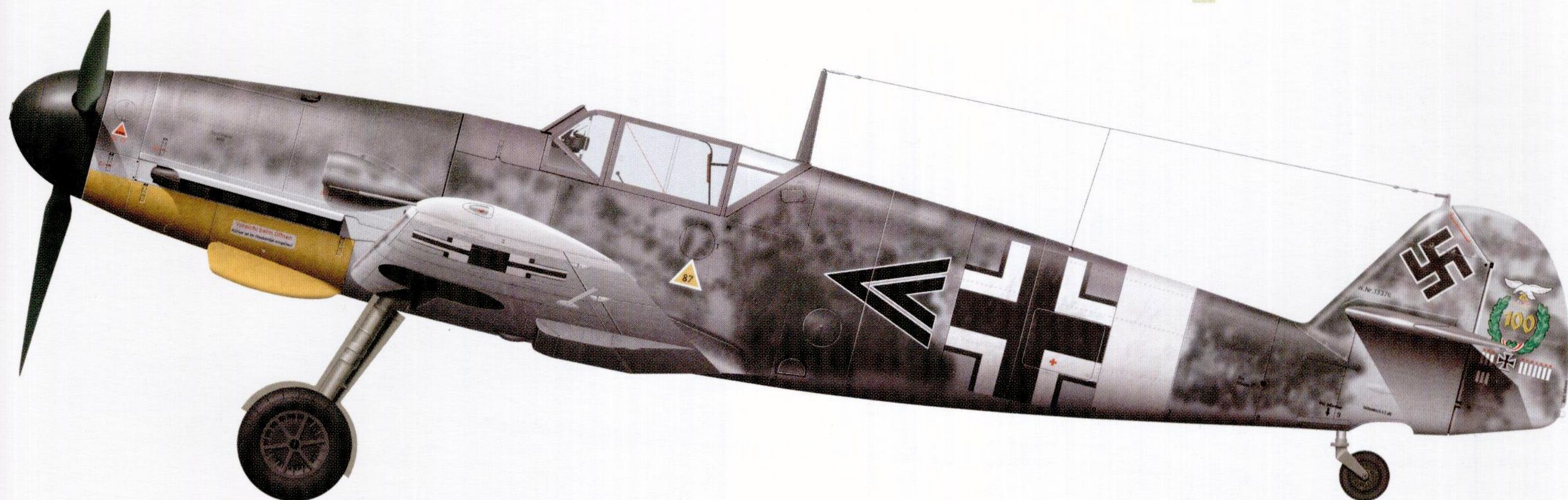


THIS PAGE: The Bf 109 F-4 trop 'Yellow 5', W.Nr. 10074, in which Lt. Gerhard Mix of 6./JG 27 was shot down on 14 August 1942. Lt. Mix's aircraft was damaged in the cooling system during an air battle near El Alamein and Mix made an emergency landing behind the British lines where he was taken prisoner. It is believed that Mix was shot down by a Spitfire of 92 Sqdn. flown by S/Ldr. Wedgewood.



THIS PAGE: On 28 June 1942, I./JG 77 began to transfer from the Crimea to the Mediterranean specifically for the renewed attacks on Malta. The Gruppe, under the command of Hptm. Heinz Bär, arrived in Sicily on 5 July and flew its first mission the following day. The photographs on this page show the rudder decoration on Hptm. Bär's Bf 109 F-4 in August when it included a representation of the Swords, awarded on 16 February 1942, at which time Bär had 90 victories. The 113 victories recorded on this machine, W.Nr. 13376, are the same as when Bär arrived in the Mediterranean theatre and, as he did not achieve any more confirmed victories until he shot down two Spitfires on 13 October, the rudder decoration remained the same until this aircraft was 45 per cent destroyed in a crash-landing at Lecce on 28 August. Interestingly, the same eagle with lightning bolts together with similar designs featuring a wreath, Knight's Cross and ribbon – evidently produced by the same artist – adorned the tails of the aircraft flown at this time by other 'Experten' of I./JG 77, notably Oblt. Friedrich Geisshardt and Oblt. Siegfried Freytag.





Messerschmitt Bf 109 F-4, W.Nr 13376, flown by Hptm. Heinz Bär, Kommandeur of I./JG 77, Comiso, August 1942

Arriving in the Mediterranean theatre directly from the Eastern Front, this aircraft was finished in a standard camouflage scheme of RLM 74, 75 and 76 and, as with large numbers of other aircraft photographed in North Africa at around this time, probably remained in these colours. The rudder was marked to show 113 victories and included an elaborate design comprising a laurel wreath surmounted by a Luftwaffe eagle clutching lightning bolts while, at the bottom of the wreath, was a Knight's Cross complete with ribbon, Oak Leaves and Swords.

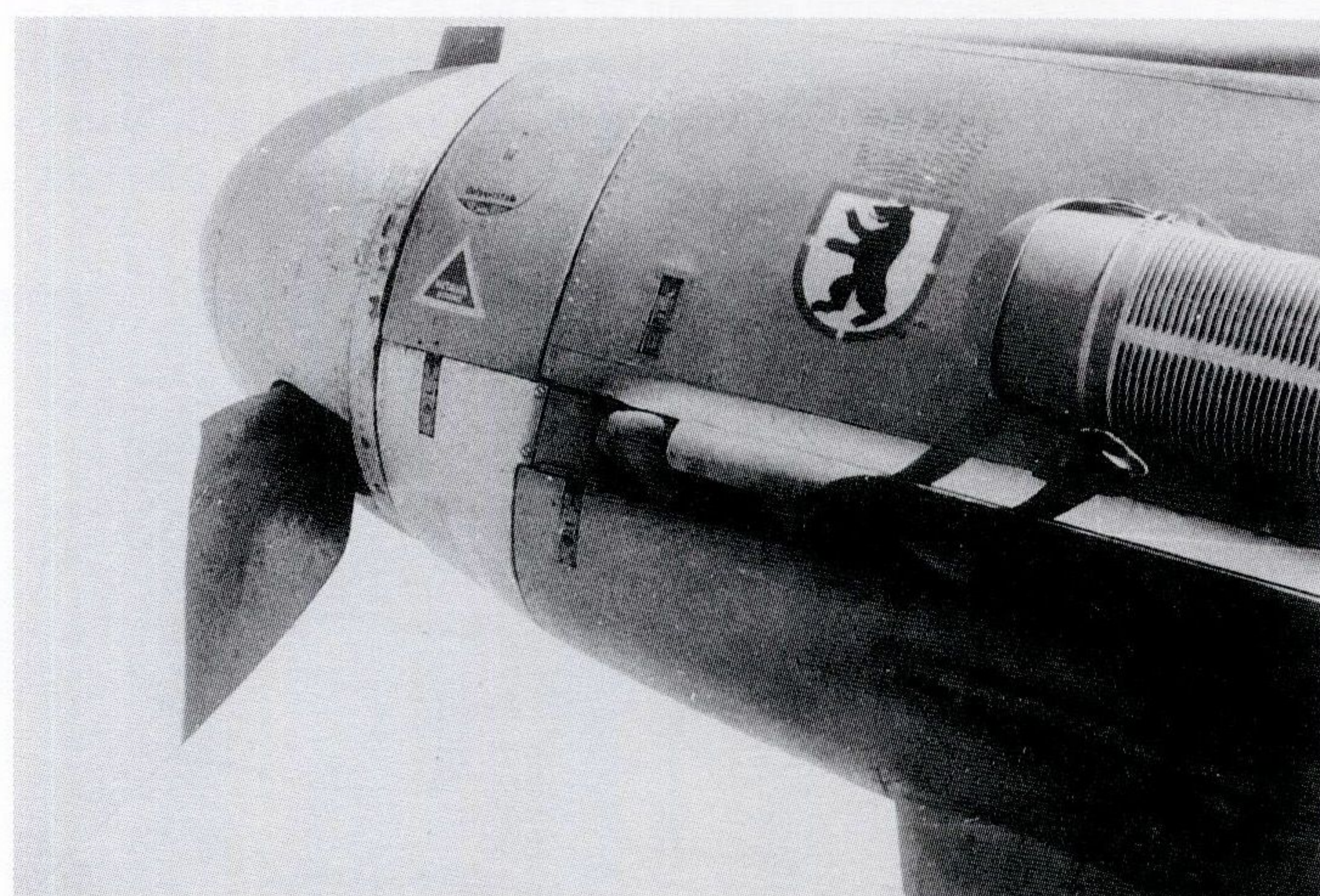
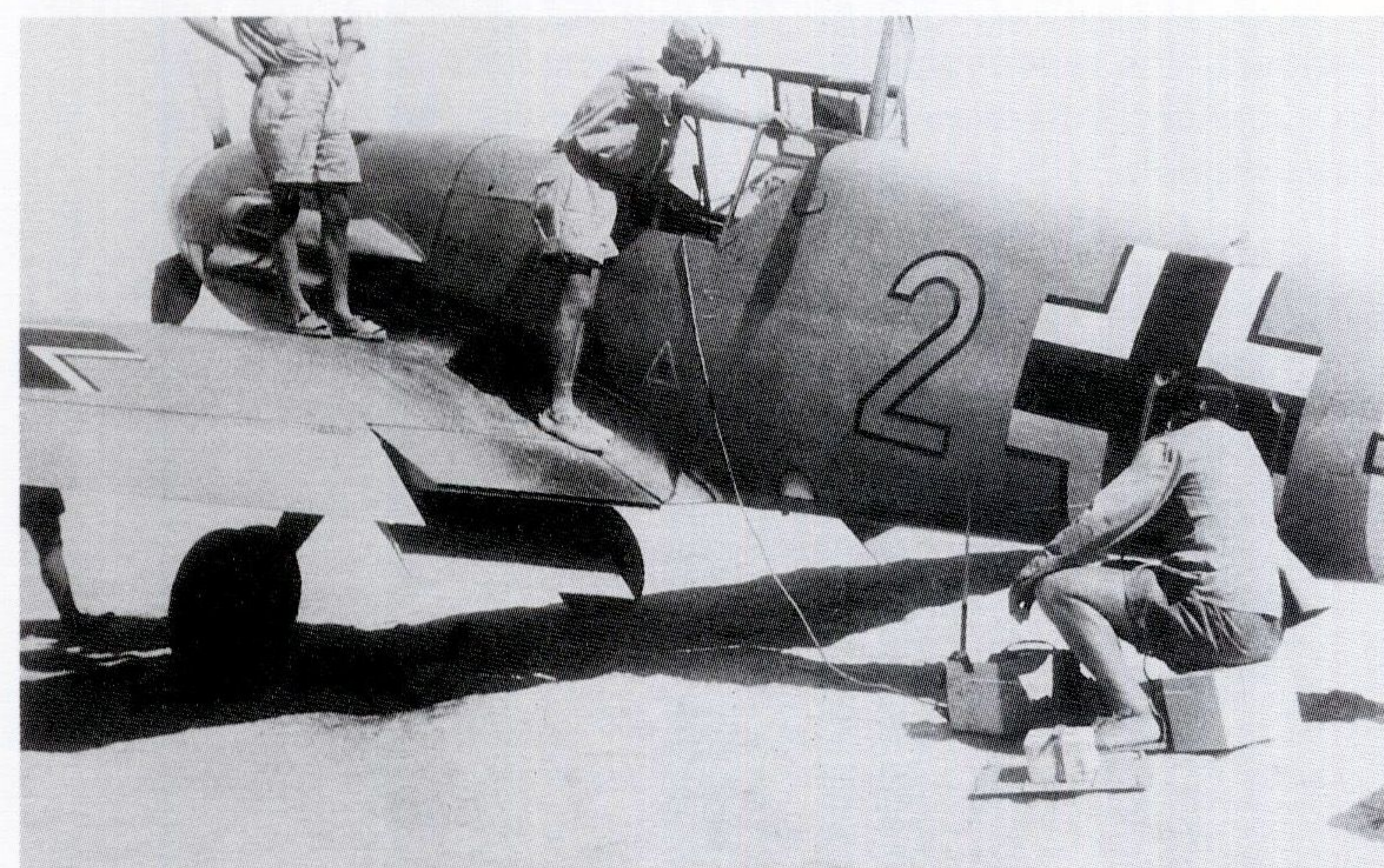
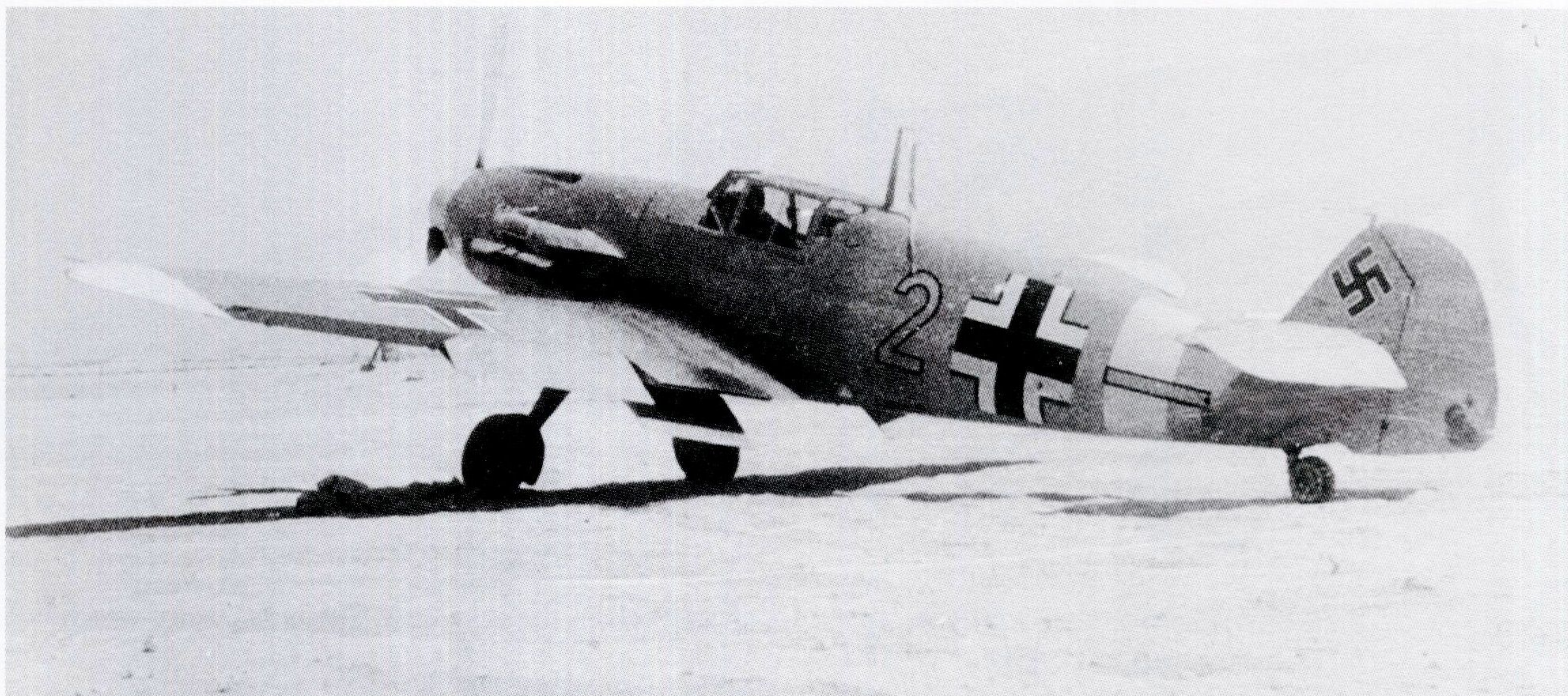


LEFT: Heinz Bär was born in Sommerfeld near Leipzig, and in the Summer of 1942, when I./JG 77 was still based in Sicily, the Leipzig Zoo presented Bär with a lion cub. A number of photographs taken in this period show Bär seated with his mascot in one of the first Bf 109 G-2's received by I./JG 77, which was then converting to the new type. Bär's G-2 carried a personal emblem featuring a lion and the Leipzig coat of arms. The lion is believed to have been yellow, outlined in black and had black details and brown shading to the mane. The shield featured two vertical lines in medium blue. This emblem appeared on both sides of Bär's aircraft immediately below the windscreen, the starboard emblem being a mirror image of that shown here, so that the lion faced towards the front of the aircraft and the blue stripes appeared on the left side of the shield.

RIGHT: A closer view of the Gruppen emblem seen on one of the unit's Bf 109 Fs at the time it was converting to the Bf 109 G-2. This particular machine was flown by Oblt. Friedrich Geisshardt, the Staffelkapitän of 3./JG 77, who is shown in Sicily in August 1942 when I./JG 77 was operating under Jafü Sizilien, mainly flying freie Jagd and escort missions for bombers and dive-bombers attacking Malta. When Geisshardt arrived in the Mediterranean in 1942 he had 82 victories and had recently been awarded the Oak Leaves. By the time I./JG 77 transferred to North Africa in October he had been credited with another nine victories, all of them Spitfires. Geisshardt remained Staffelkapitän of 3./JG 77 until January 1943 when he took up a new appointment as Kommandeur of III./JG 26.



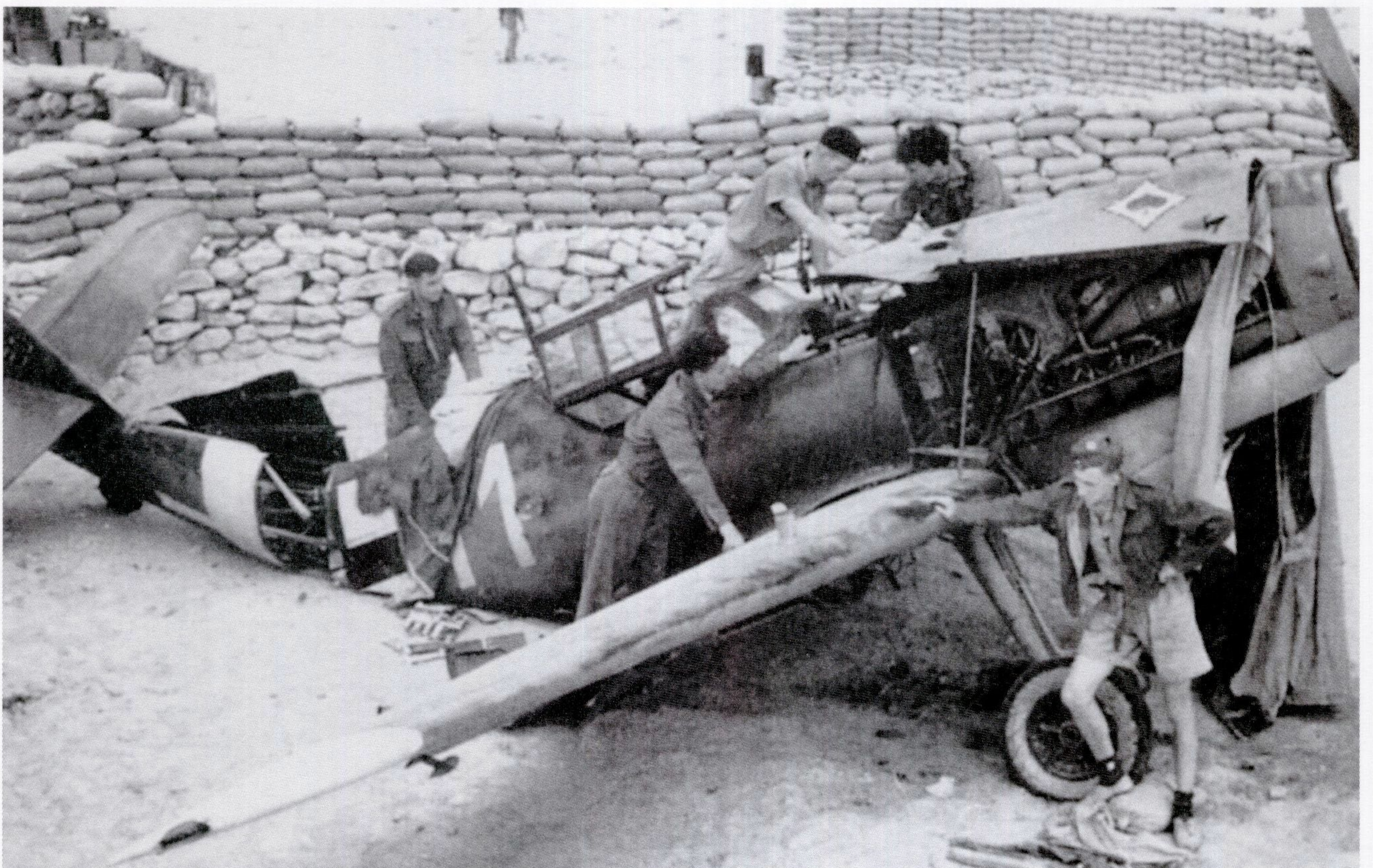
RIGHT, BELOW LEFT AND BELOW RIGHT: Various views of a Bf 109 F-4 trop of 6./JG 27 coded 'Yellow 2' finished in a mid-demarcation tropical scheme. A close-up of the nose of this aircraft (*BELOW RIGHT*) shows the badge of II./JG 27 and that there was a white area behind the spinner, probably as a result of some swapped panels. The rest of the underside of the nose would have been yellow.



LEFT: The unusually proportioned fuselage cross mentioned on Page 109 is again evident in this photograph of 'White 13', a Bf 109 F-4 trop of 4./JG 27. As this photograph was taken by a British cameraman, it is possible that the crash-landed aircraft was deliberately set alight for the benefit of the photographer.



LEFT AND BELOW: A Bf 109 E, destroyed in its blast bay, being examined by Allied personnel. The emblem on the cowling shows that this machine obviously served with JG 53 but although the aircraft is marked with the horizontal bar of II. Gruppe, it is thought that as this Gruppe was in Sicily between May and November, this machine in fact belonged to III./JG 53. Note the all white wingtips.

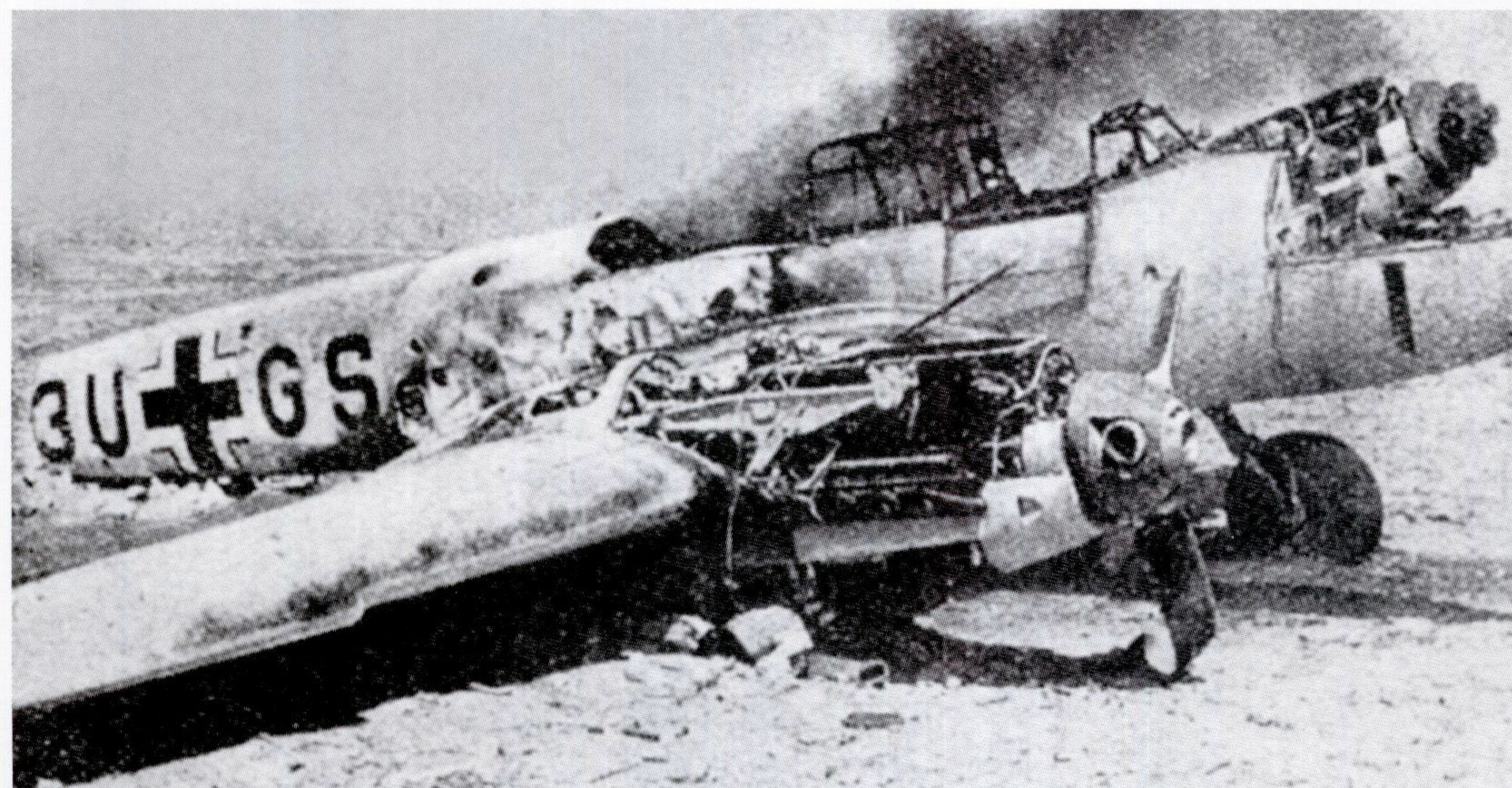


LEFT: Also discovered during the later Allied advance was this propeller blade marking the grave of Lt. Erich Beckmann, a pilot of 9./JG 53 who was wounded when the airfield at Sidi Barrani was bombed on 26 June 1942 and died on 11 September.



LEFT: One of the first Luftwaffe units to transfer to the Mediterranean in the Spring of 1941 was III./ZG 26, with parts operating against Malta under Jafü Sizilien and parts in North Africa under Fliegerführer Afrika. In July, the 8. Staffel came under the command of Oblt. Fritz Schutze-Dickow, seen here with one of his machines. Despite heavy losses, the Staffel achieved a number of aerial victories and also flew numerous convoy escort and ground-attack sorties in direct support of the ground troops. By October 1942, 8./ZG 26 was based at Berce and Derna and by December had withdrawn to Tripoli.

RIGHT: Stripped of its weapons and any useful components, 3U+DR of 7./ZG 26 lies abandoned after a crash-landing in the desert. The fuselage camouflage is interesting and would appear to consist of dense dark green meandering lines over the lighter undersurface colour.



LEFT: Coded 3U+GS, this Bf 110, an aircraft of 8./ZG 26, was still smouldering when photographed by a British official photographer in mid-1942.

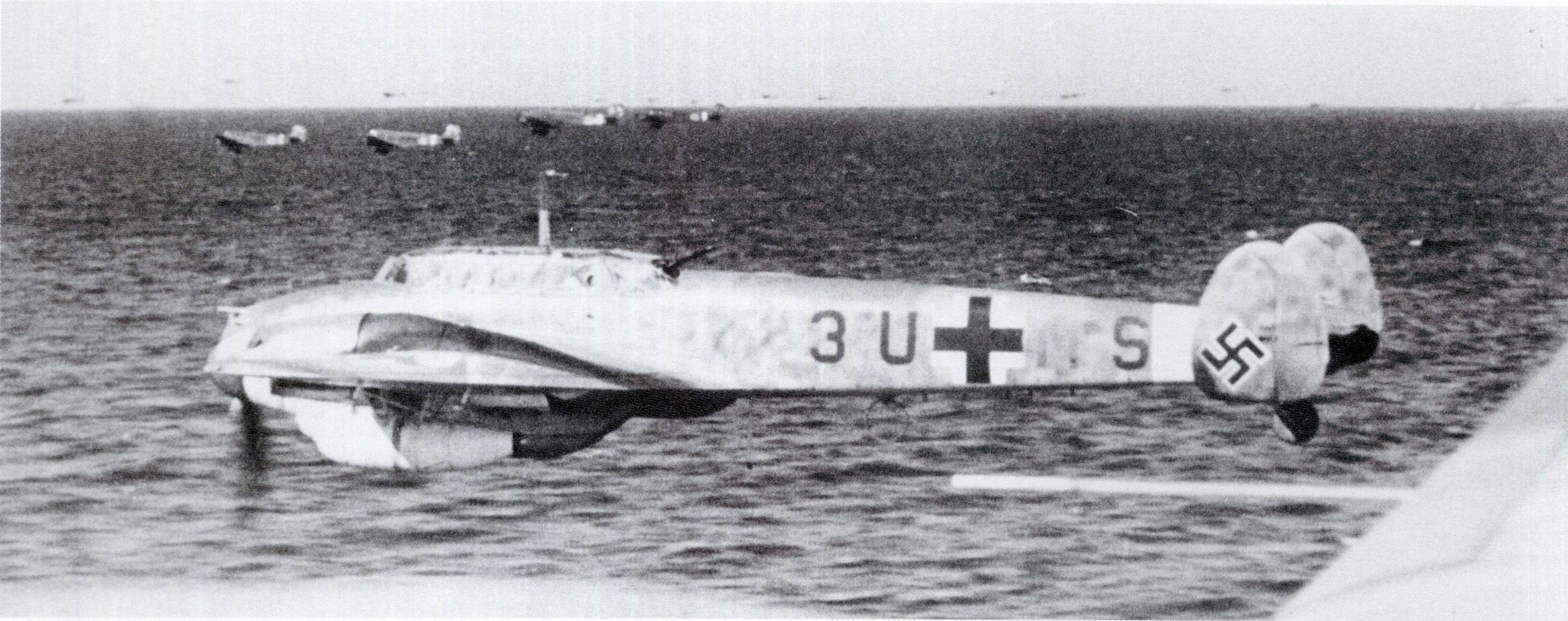


LEFT: A Rotte of ZG 26s Bf 110's on patrol. Both aircraft, believed to be Bf 110 E-2/Ns, are finished in an uppersurface scheme of overall Sandgelb 79, probably with Hellblau 78 undersurfaces. The aircraft in the foreground, 3U+KS, carried the markings of 8./ZG 26, while the second machine still carries the Stammkennzeichen SB+GD.

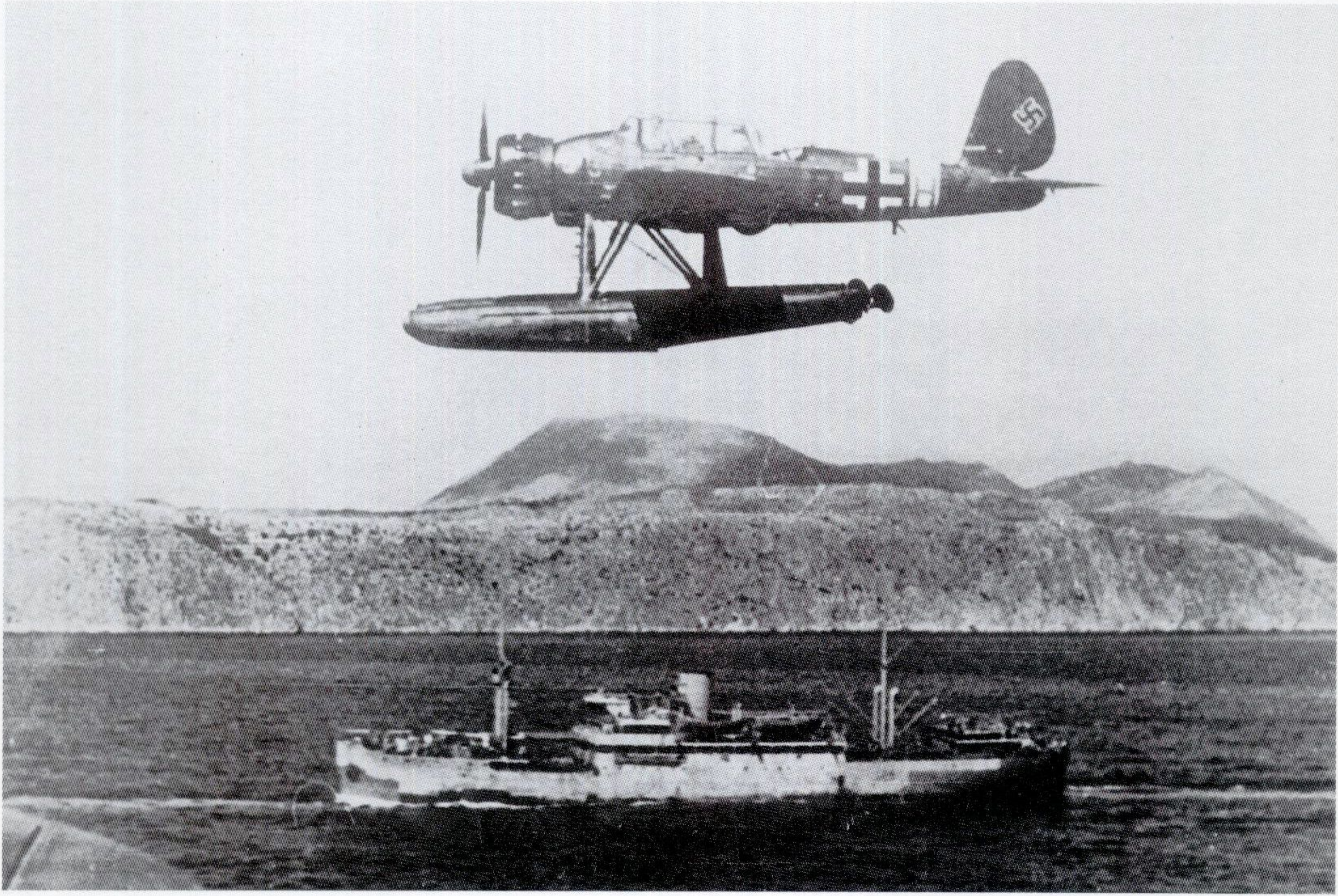
BELOW: This aircraft has been fitted with underwing auxiliary fuel tanks which allowed the aircraft to remain in the air for up to five hours. It was found that the oil capacity of the engine sumps was inadequate for flights of such duration and that an additional means of providing engine lubrication was required. The solution was to fit an auxiliary oil tank beneath the fuselage, as shown on this aircraft of 8./ZG 26 flying convoy escort duty, one of the many tasks allocated to III./ZG 26 in the Mediterranean. This particular aircraft, 3U+ES, is clearly finished in the 74/75/76 grey scheme with the engine nacelles heavily stained with exhaust deposits.



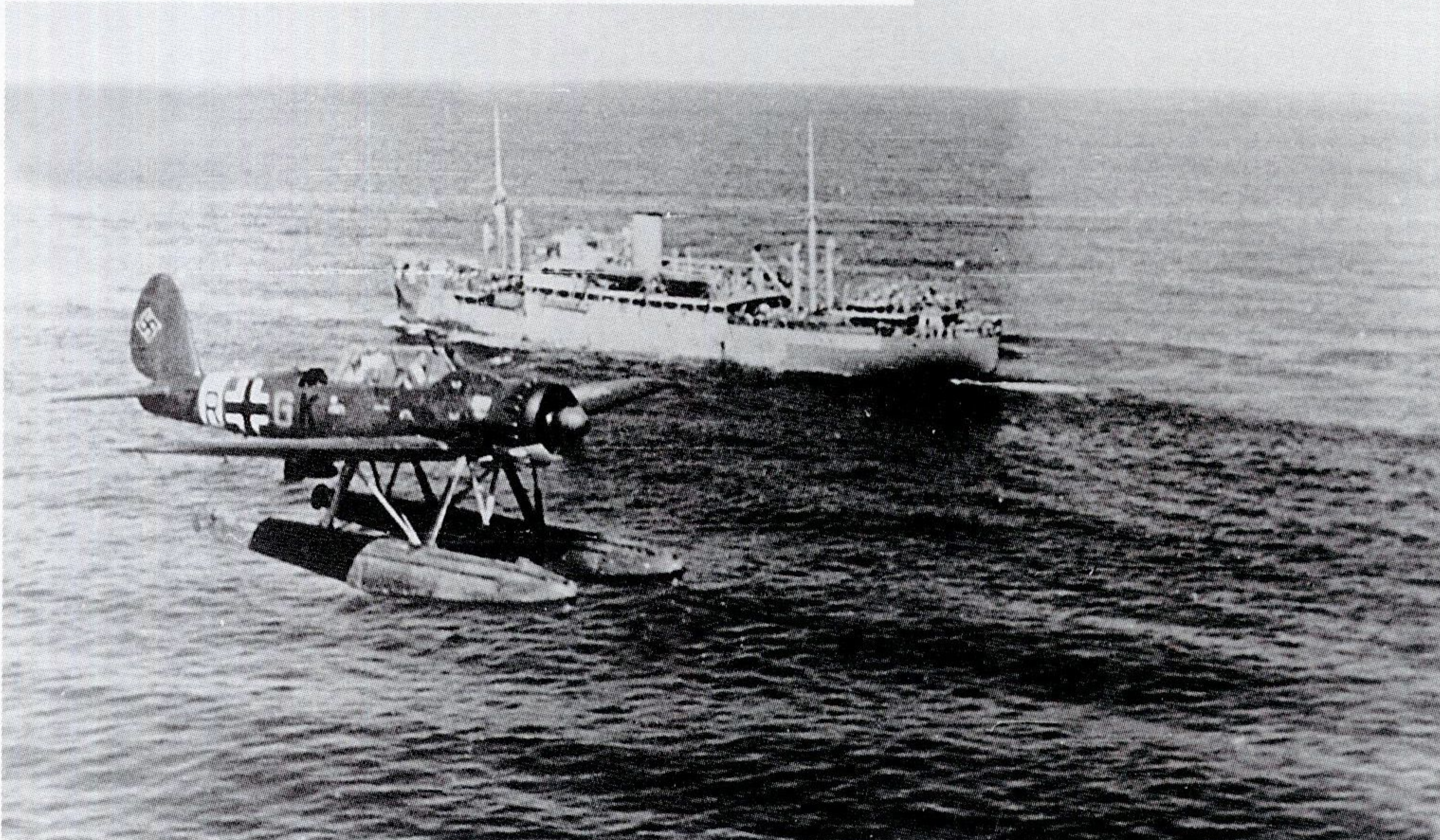
LEFT: Another view of an underwing 900 litre auxiliary fuel tank on an aircraft of ZG 26 based on Sicily. Note that the nose of this machine still has traces of the yellow identification paint used in the Balkans in April and May 1941.



ABOVE: In addition to convoy escort duties, III./ZG 26 also escorted the fleets of Ju 52s bringing supplies from Greece and Italy.



ABOVE AND RIGHT: Some of the convoy escort duties were later taken over by Ar 196 floatplanes, these photographs showing aircraft coded 7R+HK and 7R+GK from Aufklärungsgruppe 126 escorting merchant shipping.



Black September

At the end of August the strength of the *Luftwaffe* units assembled under *Luftflotte 2* was as follows:

	II. Fliegerkorps	X. Fliegerkorps	Fliegerführer Afrika	Total
Recce			12 (7)	12 (7)
Long range recce	24 (15)	15 (8)	11 (7)	50 (30)
Fighters	43 (31)		114 (59)	157 (90)
Fighter-bombers			14 (7)	14 (7)
Zerstörer	5 (2)	27 (17)	24 (19)	56 (38)
Bombers	74 (29)	123 (64)	12 (5)	209 (98)
Dive-bombers			103 (71)	103 (71)
Seaplanes		37 (19)		37 (19)
Totals:	146 (77)	202 (108)	290 (175)	638 (360)

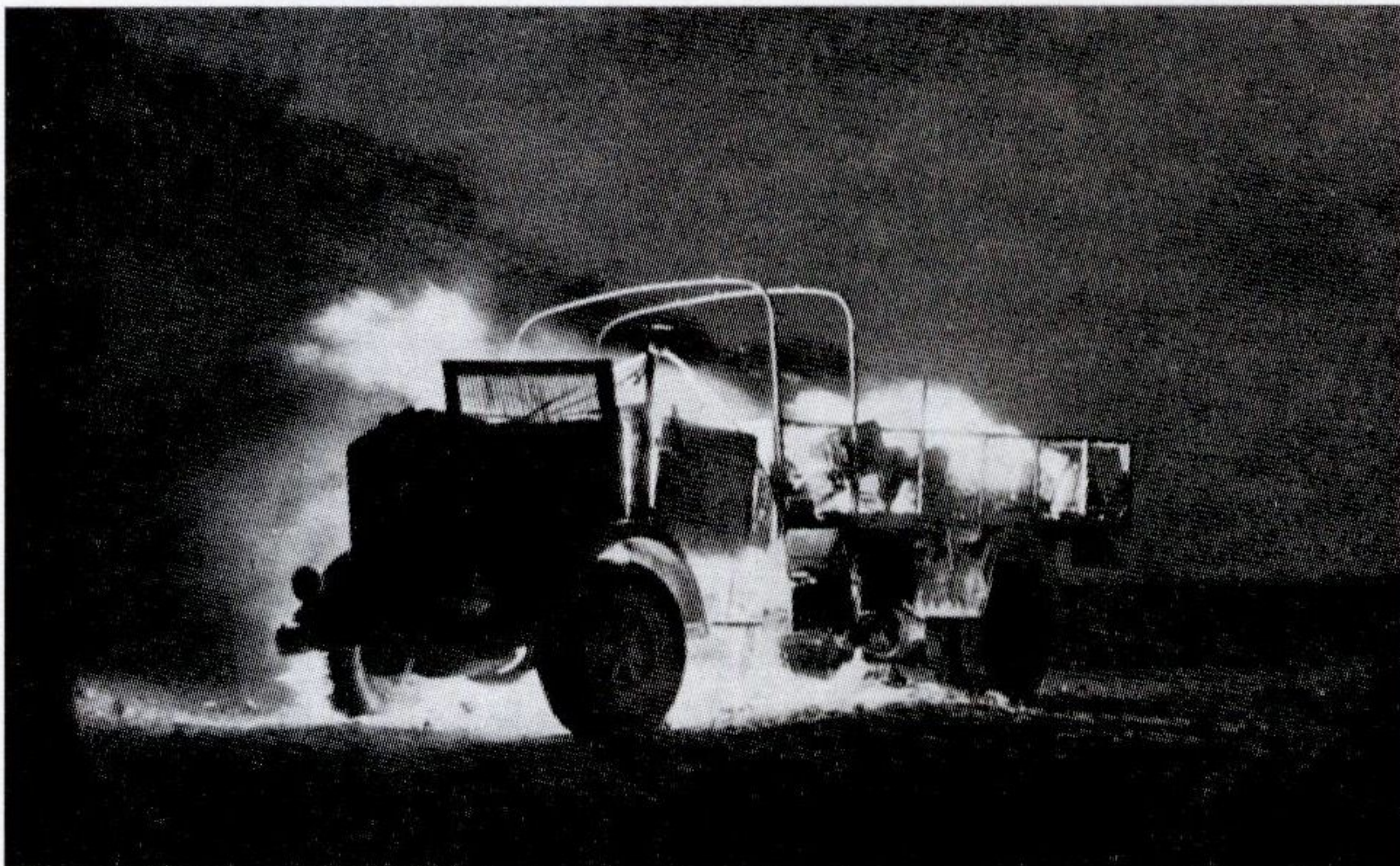
BELOW: During the battle of Alam Halfa, night attacks by the RAF against Rommel's forces caused immense damage and the German soldiers' morale and fighting capacity was shaken by the continuous bombing and lack of sleep. However, it was the effect on his supply columns that was Rommel's greatest concern, for without supplies, an army becomes immobilised and incapable of action. Fuel was of particular importance, for the flow across the Mediterranean was still far below Rommel's requirements and, with each petrol carrier set ablaze, the supply for his tanks diminished.

In addition, the meteorological unit in the Eastern Mediterranean, *Wekusta 26*, possessed a few aircraft and another 178 machines, mainly Ju 52/3ms, were available to the transport units. However, this limited fleet was totally inadequate to sufficiently supply a force the size of *Panzerarmee Afrika* and a large amount of Rommel's requirements were dependent upon sea transport. The above table shows that the largest forces were now attached to *Fliegerführer Afrika* for, now that Hitler had finally abandoned 'Herakles', Kesselring had agreed to release units from Sicily and Italy to support what was to prove Rommel's last attempt to break through the El Alamein position and push into Egypt.

The *Panzerarmee Afrika* began its attack shortly before midnight on 30 August, with the main force swinging south of the British positions to come round east of Alam Halfa and surround Eighth Army. The next day, Rommel's ground forces were supported by bombers and dive-bombers, but the defences were strong and, despite numerous and successful action by German and Italian fighters, the attack ground to a halt. A major cause of this was that attacks on Rommel's supply lines in the central Mediterranean, along the coastal route to the front and on the field of battle, had starved his forces of supplies, particularly petrol. Although his armoured units came under attack by Allied bombers, very few tanks were put out of action by bombing, but Hurricane anti-tank fighters did make a successful début at this time. However, the bombing set hundreds of vehicles, and their precious petrol, ablaze, and the German attack was halted principally because petrol supplies for the armour were exhausted and because Rommel's troops were immobilised by the RAF's round-the-clock bombing in terrain which offered no cover.

I./JG 27 was very active during this period, claiming 22 fighters on 1 September, mainly P-40s, no fewer than 17 being shot down by *ObLt.* Hans-Joachim Marseille leading the 3. *Staffel*. The following day, Marseille was credited with another five victories and on the 3rd, I./JG 27 alone destroyed 14 fighters, six being destroyed by *ObLt.* Marseille and another five by *Lt.* Arnold Stahlschmidt. But since German and Italian fighters were unable to break through the strong escort screen which protected the Western Desert Air Force's bombers, these efforts did nothing to influence the situation and although 13 bombers were lost, they were all shot down by *Flak*. The bombers were therefore able to fly practically unopposed over the units of *Panzerarmee Afrika* and inflict considerable damage on the ground forces. On the 2nd, Rommel – shaken and dismayed by the RAF's superiority in the air – ordered his forces to pull back to the line El Taqa/Bab el Qattara.

The Axis forces now dug in and began to prepare a defensive position of some depth between the sea and the Qattara Depression. Rommel knew that if his forces were driven out of this line, they would be overwhelmed through lack of vehicles and the fuel required to either withdraw or fight a mobile battle. Montgomery, however, was determined not to attack until he had built up a massive superiority and the front again became quiet as more and more US aircraft arrived in North Africa and more Spitfires arrived to replace the Hurricanes which, although they had performed well over the desert, were now obsolescent.



On the German side, too, pilots hoped for more modern aircraft, and by the end of September I./JG 27 had received five examples of the new Bf 109 G-2 *trop*². It was, however, too late to entertain any hopes of regaining air superiority; on the contrary, German losses would continue to increase. In September, five pilots were killed or missing and another became a PoW, and while not in themselves excessive, these losses involved pilots with considerable skill and experience. On the 6th, Fw. Günther Steinhausen of I./JG 27 was shot down in combat after having accounted for his 40th *Abschüss*, a Hurricane, that same day. He was posthumously awarded the Knight's Cross. On the following day, Lt. Hans-Arnold Stahlschmidt, *Staffelführer* of 2./JG 27, was reported missing near El Alamein. He was a close friend of Marseille, had been decorated with the *Ritterkreuz*, and was credited with 60 *Luftsiege*. He, too, was honoured after his death and was posthumously awarded the Oak Leaves.

On the 30th, Marseille himself was lost. During September alone he had been credited with the destruction of no fewer than 54 enemy fighters but, despite his efforts and those of his comrades, it was impossible to turn the tide. Marseille had taken off in a new Bf 109 G but, while returning to Quotaifiya, his aircraft's engine caught fire, a typical problem with the early G-2. Marseille, not inexperienced in baling out, jettisoned the canopy and turned his aircraft on its back, but as he fell away he struck the tailplane and plunged unconscious to his death, his parachute still unopened. Marseille's body hit the ground near Sidi-Abd-el-Rahman. He was still not yet 23 years old, but had been officially credited with 158 victories, only four of which were bombers; all the rest were fighters and all his victories were scored against Commonwealth forces.

Although Marseille was obviously not the only *Luftwaffe* ace in North Africa, his name had been so closely linked with the early successes in Africa that many considered his death an omen in as much that if the *Panzerarmee Afrika* could lose Marseille, then it could very well lose Africa, too. Including Marseille's 54 victories, I./JG 27 claimed 87 *Luftsiege* in September in return for the loss of 11 Bf 109s totally destroyed.

II./JG 27 lost 10 Bf 109 Fs in September, with two pilots killed and one taken prisoner in return for 15 claimed victories, all against fighters. The *Kommandeur*, *Hptm.* Gustav Rödel, accounted for five victories that month before he was himself shot down on the 15th, and although he survived, his Bf 109 was 100% destroyed. *Oblt.* Rudolf Sinner of 5./JG 27 was equally successful and also claimed five enemy aircraft destroyed.

On 3 September, III./JG 27 moved from Quasaba to Bir-el-Abd in order to be closer to the front line. The *Gruppe* was then heavily engaged in the area, and although its operations mainly involved strafing ground targets and escorting Ju 87s, its pilots nevertheless claimed 34 victories including 13 on 15 September alone. This *Gruppe* contained some outstanding pilots whose exploits are worth mentioning. Lt. Werner Schroer of 8./JG 27, for example, shot down 13 aircraft in the month but, unlike his friend Marseille, who on several occasions destroyed many aircraft in a single day, Schroer was a pilot who steadily built up his score day by day. He later received the *Ritterkreuz* and survived the war.

Uffz. Erich Krainik of 8./JG 27 shot down his first enemy aircraft on 2 September but ended the month with six victories and thus become an ace in only four weeks. However, Krainik's career was short, for he was killed on 26th October but by then with 13 victories to his credit.

Uffz. Viktor Gruber of 7./JG 27 claimed to have shot down his seventh victory, a liaison aircraft identified as an NAA 64, over Fayoum airfield in one of the *Gruppe*'s daring intruder missions, but on the same mission, Fw. Walter Fink, also of 7./JG 27, was shot down and captured near Saqqarah. The sole bomber claimed that month by III./JG 27 was a Halifax which was destroyed, not in Africa, but near Heraklion, in Crete where, to support the Bf 110s of III./ZG 26 based on the island, JG 27 had still two or three fighters serving with the *Jagdkommando Kreta*. RAF bombers often came to harass the Crete airfields and, on 5 September, a formation of nine Lancasters attacked the island. One was shot down by Fw. Arthur Liebhold of 8./JG 27, his second victory, and another was damaged. III./JG 27's total losses in September amounted to five aircraft destroyed, two pilots captured during the battle at Alam Halfa – including Fw. Walter Fink, already mentioned – and a fourth pilot killed.

Operating alongside JG 27 was III./JG 53 which was also engaged in operations over Alam Halfa, but its losses were light, the only pilot shot down being *Uffz.* Adolf Jennerich who was captured on 27 September when four Bf 109 Fs of 7./JG 53 carrying extra fuel tanks took off on a daring long-range freelance raid to the Cairo area. Jennerich's aircraft was hit by anti-aircraft fire and he was taken

continued on page 125

2. At the end of September, five pilots from 1. Staffel Jabo Gruppe Africa went to Turbiya to collect JG 27's redundant Bf 109 Fs.

Hans-Joachim Marseille

The Marseille family was of French Huguenot origin but fled from their homeland because of their Lutheran beliefs and eventually settled in the province of Brandenburg in north-east Prussia. Parts of the family later moved to Berlin, and Hans-Joachim Marseille was born in Berlin-Charlottenburg on 13 December 1919. Although Hans-Joachim's father was an Army officer, domestic life was free of strict military traditions and he and his sister were raised in a fairly relaxed atmosphere. When he was in his early teens, Hans-Joachim's parents divorced and his mother married a policeman. His real father later became a *Generalmajor* with the infantry and was killed in Russia in 1943.

There seems to have been nothing remarkable about Hans-Joachim Marseille's youth but, as frequently happens with only sons, his mother doted on him and perhaps failed to impose the necessary discipline. Having passed all his school examinations, Marseille's passion for flying led him to apply to join the *Luftwaffe*, which accepted him as a *Fähnrich*, or officer candidate, on 7 November 1939. During training, he was often irresponsible and distinguished himself mainly by his number of disciplinary offences, for which he was punished and spent several days under open arrest or confined to barracks.

With his training completed, Marseille was posted to I.(Jagd)/LG 2, joining *Oblt.* Adolf Buhl's 3. *Staffel* based at Calais-Marck on 12 August 1940. Assigned as wingman to *Ofw.* Helmut Goedert, Marseille flew his first combat sortie on the 15th. On 24 August, the *Gruppe* flew three *freie Jagd* missions over south-east England, during which *Fhr.* Marseille shot down a Spitfire as his first victory. His second victory, another Spitfire, followed on 2nd September, but on the same day he severely damaged his Bf 109 E-1 when he crash-landed at Calais-Marck. At about this time, Marseille became a *Rottenführer* and on 11 September he shot down another Spitfire but his own aircraft, a Bf 109 E-7, was damaged by a Hurricane and Marseille had to make an emergency landing, following which his aircraft was written off. Flying another E-7 on the 23rd, his aircraft was again damaged and Marseille baled out into the Channel.

In October, Marseille left I.(Jagd)/LG 2 and was posted to II./JG 52. At this time he had a total of seven victories and, despite his minor infringements of military discipline, the *Gruppenkommandeur* of I./LG 2, *Hptm.* Herbert Ihlefeld, had a good opinion of him and recognised that Marseille was a pilot with above-average qualities. His next commanding officer, *Oblt.* Johannes Steinhoff, *Staffelkapitän* of 4./JG 52, held a similar opinion, describing him as 'a terrific flier' but lacking self-discipline. However, it would seem that Marseille had a personality which, while irresistibly charming to some, others found extremely irritating and, unlike *Hptm.* Ihlefeld, *Oblt.* Steinhoff was not prepared to tolerate Marseille's irresponsibility and 'sent him packing'.

He was next assigned to I./JG 27 based at Döberitz, where his new *Kommandeur*, *Hptm.* Eduard Neumann, although appreciating that Marseille was an 'impertinent rascal', also recognised his potential and assigned him to 3./JG 27 under the serious and intellectual *Oblt.* Gerhard Homuth. With this *Staffel* Marseille took part in the invasion of Yugoslavia and on 6 April had to make a emergency landing after his aircraft was hit by anti-aircraft fire.

The campaign in Yugoslavia, and the subsequent invasion of Greece, came at a time when the *Luftwaffe* was preparing for the attack on Russia, but the operations in the Balkans progressed so well that some fighter units operating there could soon be withdrawn early and on 14 April 1941, I./JG 27 was therefore recalled to München-Riem, ostensibly for the attack on Russia.

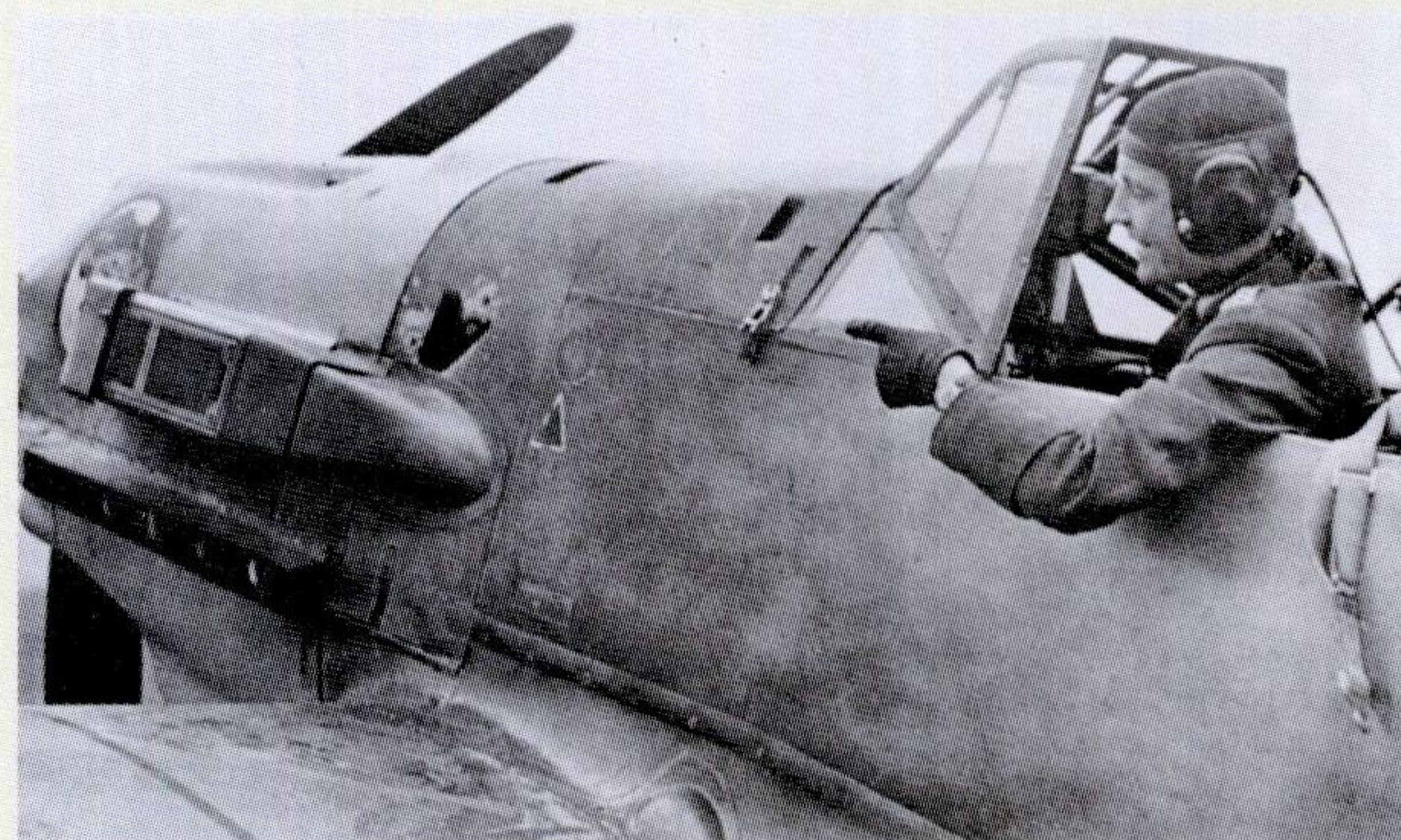
Almost immediately however, the *Gruppe* was ordered to transfer instead to Libya where the exploits of Hans-Joachim Marseille would become legendary.

Although now an *Oberfähnrich*, or senior officer cadet, Marseille had not yet been commissioned as he was still considered too wayward and too unorthodox to be an officer. He liked 'degenerate' music, considered his acquaintance with actresses to be of more importance than his military responsibilities, played practical jokes, wore his hair long, and was thought of as a show-off and a playboy. Homuth disliked him intensely.

On 20 April, during the transfer flight to Libya, *Ofhr.* Marseille had to make an emergency landing due to engine trouble but succeeded in re-joining his unit the following day. On the 23rd, he succeeded in destroying his first enemy aircraft in Africa, a Hurricane over Tobruk, but his own aircraft was damaged and he made a forced landing, also near Tobruk. Although he



BELOW: It is believed that this photograph of *Oberfähnrich* Marseille pointing to engine damage was taken during Operation 'Marita' after an attack against an airfield in Yugoslavia on 6 April 1941.



BELOW: Lt. Marseille, left, apparently watching intently as his *Staffelkapitän*, *Oblt.* Gerhard Homuth, scratches a diagram in the ground. This photograph is one of a series undoubtedly posed for the benefit of a PK cameraman and, despite the impression of camaraderie suggested here, these two pilots were set apart by their personalities which led to friction in their relationship.



RIGHT: Hptm. Eduard Neumann, Kommandeur of I./JG 27 and later Kommodore. Neumann was a very good pilot and an excellent leader, possessing outstanding personal characteristics which allowed him to recognise Marseille's potential. It was largely due to Neumann's tolerance and encouragement that Marseille developed into such an outstandingly successful fighter-pilot, sometimes spending long periods alone in the desert while he devised the tactics which would make him famous.



destroyed a Blenheim on 28 April and two Hurricanes on 1 May, he was too enthusiastic and carried out his attacks recklessly, almost without regard for his own safety. The result of this was all too predictable and his aircraft was again damaged on 21 May, as a result of which he made another forced landing in the desert. This was too much for Neumann who informed Marseille that he was only still alive because he had more luck than sense and advised him to slow down and pay more attention to acquiring the necessary maturity and experience.

Marseille seems to have taken this good advice to heart and, perhaps driven by an ambition to be the best, quickly adjusted to the very different flying conditions in Africa. Under the guidance of *Hptm.* Neumann, he practised flying until he was so thoroughly familiar with his aircraft that manoeuvres were performed automatically. He also developed his own tactics and practised ways of firing quick, accurate bursts and devoted much time to the art of deflection shooting, which he practised from different angles and at different speeds. Often, during a turning battle with an individual opponent, he would throttle back and lower his flaps in order to be able to cut inside his target's turning radius. In such a manoeuvre, the target aircraft was invisible beneath the nose of the attacking aircraft, but Marseille perfected such shooting and developed an instinct for precisely the right moment to open fire. He was equally aware that, when pursued in a tight turn for example, his opponent would also be faced with a deflection shot and once commented, 'As long as I look right into the muzzles, nothing can happen to me. Only if he pulls lead am I in danger.'

Slowly his victories increased, the crash-landings became less frequent and, although still possessing a wild sense of humour, he became more responsible. On 28 August, Marseille, at last a *Leutnant*, destroyed a Hurricane near Sidi Barrani as his 14th victory and by 24 September, on which date he claimed five victories, his tally had increased to 23. In November, I./JG 27 converted to the Bf 109 F, then a superior aircraft to the Allied Hurricanes and P-40s and one with which Marseille would achieve the majority of his victories.

BELOW: The pin on the reverse of the German Cross was wide and blunt and the decoration was usually worn with the pin passing through two cotton loops especially sewn onto the uniform. Since Marseille's jacket has not yet received these loops, Hptm. Eduard Neumann appears therefore to be having some difficulty attaching the award. Such embarrassment could be avoided by simply handing the decoration to the recipient in its case, as was the more usual practice. The officer seen standing in the background is General der Flieger Hans Geissler, until August 1942 the commander of X. Fliegerkorps.



ABOVE: Feldmarschall Albert Kesselring congratulating Oblt. Marseille on receiving the German Cross in Gold, officially awarded on 24 November 1941. Standing in the background facing the camera is Hptm. Neumann.

On 24 November, with 25 victories, Marseille was awarded the German Cross in Gold but, following his 35th and 36th victories, both P-40s, on 17 December, Marseille fell ill and spent some time in hospital. He was then granted compassionate leave following the death of his sister, and although he did not return to Africa until the new year, Marseille showed he had lost none of his skills and claimed four P-40s shot down on 8 February. Further victories followed and on 21 February 1942 he destroyed two P-40s, so raising his score to 50 victories, for which he was awarded the *Ritterkreuz* the next day. By 3 June, Marseille's score had increased again to 69, and on that day he was credited with shooting down six P-40s in 11 minutes, bringing his score to 75. The next day it was announced that Marseille had been awarded the Oak Leaves. He was now due to return to Germany on leave, but he refused to go until he had increased his score to 100. His next success occurred on the 7th when he shot down two P-40s near El Adem as his 76th and 77th victories.



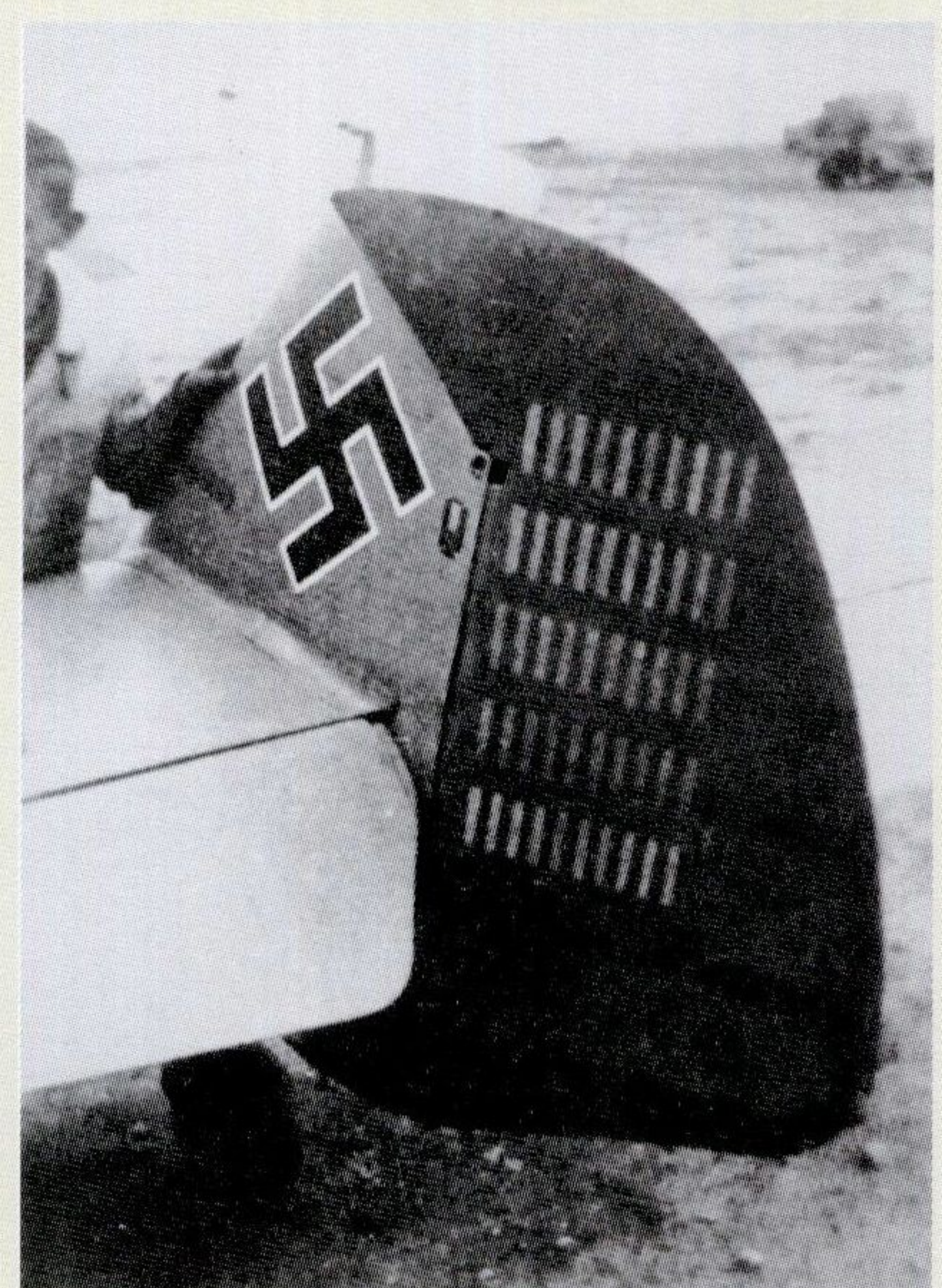
ABOVE AND RIGHT: Marseille seated in his Bf 109 F-4/Z trop, W.Nr. 8693, and (*RIGHT*) seated on the canopy sill of the same aircraft.



ABOVE: Another view of Marseille's Bf 109 F-4 trop W.Nr. 8693. This photograph was taken at Martuba on 21 February 1942 after a mission during which Marseille shot down two P-40s near Fort Acroma as his 49th and 50th victories. He was awarded the Ritterkreuz the following day. The undersurface of the cowlings was yellow and the rudder was finished in a dull red primer. Note that the wingtips on this aircraft were not painted white.



LEFT: An armorer cleaning the MG 17s from Marseille's W.Nr. 8693. Note the red primer finish on the rudder.



RIGHT: A close-up of the rudder of W.Nr. 8693 showing 50 yellow victory bars.

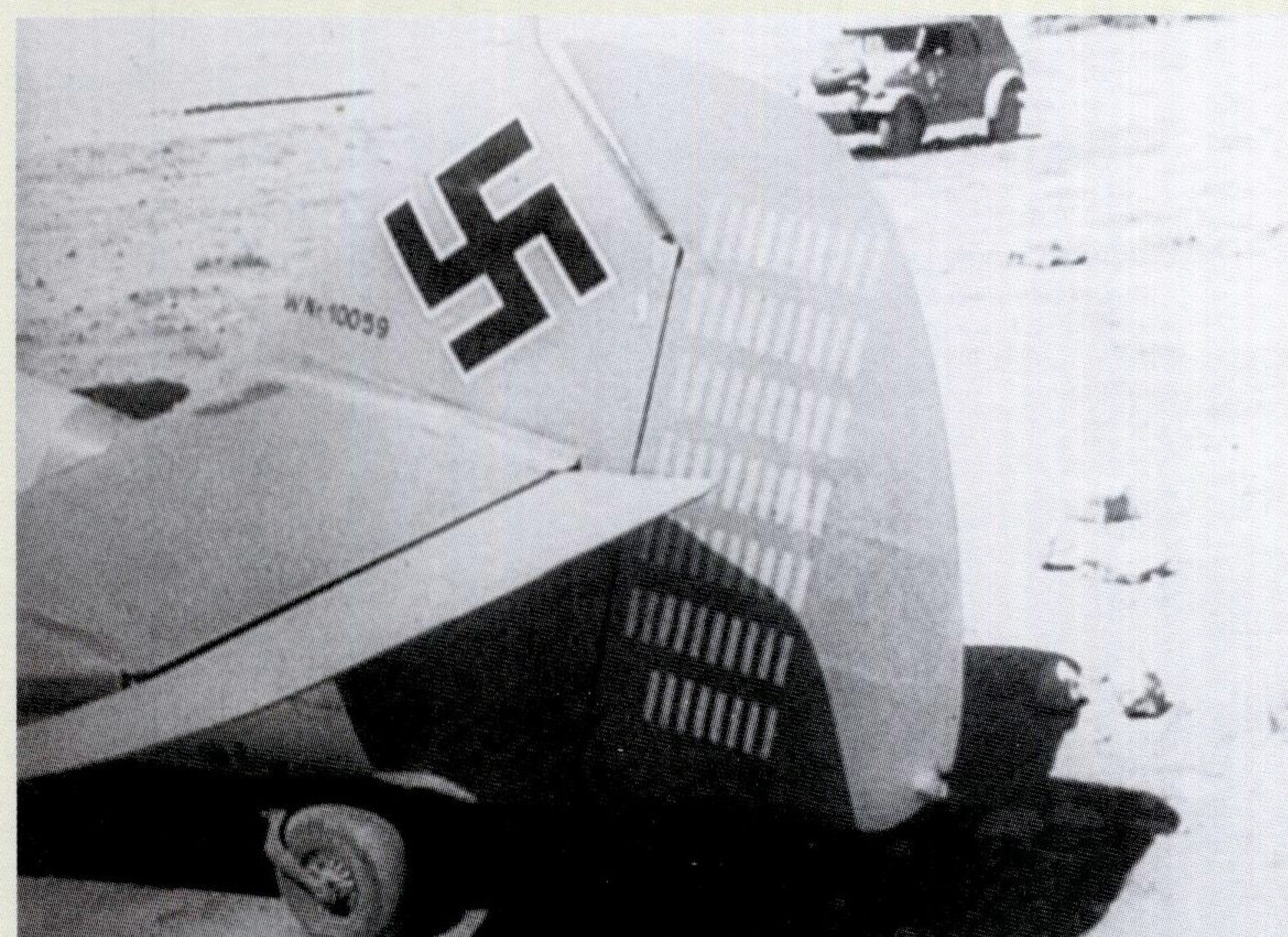
In an early morning flight on 10 June, Marseille destroyed four P-40s and with further victories on the 11th and 13th, increased his tally to 87. Meanwhile, the organisation of the *Geschwader* had undergone some changes and, with effect from 10 June, *Major* Neumann, the *Kommandeur* of I./JG 27 became *Kommodore*. In the subsequent reorganisation, *Hptm.* Gerhard Homuth was appointed his replacement and became *Gruppenkommandeur* and, as the *Staffel's* most successful pilot, *Oblt.* Marseille now took his place as *Staffelkapitän*.

In the next three days, Marseille drove himself hard, adding another 14 victories to his score but exhausting himself in the process. On two days he claimed four victories and claimed six on the 17th. All these victories were achieved within minutes of each other, his six victories on the 17th, for example, being a P-40 at 12.02 hrs, another P-40 at 12.04, three Hurricanes at 12.05, 12.08 and 12.09 and a Spitfire at 12.12 hrs. With his tally now standing at 101, he qualified for the award of the Swords and this was duly announced on 18 June.

That Marseille had very good eyesight was undoubtedly an advantage but although this allowed him to see his opponents before they saw him, in Africa it was his aggressive attitude and above all his aptitude for deflection shooting which proved most important in his role as a successful fighter pilot. If caught in a disadvantageous position, the Allied P-40s formed a defensive circle, each fighter protecting the tail of the aircraft ahead. Marseille developed tactics to defeat this defensive formation which essentially depended on using speed and deflection shooting to pick off aircraft while diving on them from above or climbing from below. By using the energy built up during his dives, Marseille was able to quickly climb above the circle to repeat his attacks. These tactics succeeded purely because of Marseille's ability to execute them. Other pilots tried to copy his technique, but it seems that no one else possessed his precise sense of timing, his distance perception or his very accurate shooting ability. Of crucial importance during his attacks was the position of his own aircraft in relation to the target and with only split seconds available, attaining the correct position required instinct rather than calculation. Even then the precise instant to open fire might only exist for an instant and success depended on extremely accurate deflection shooting. Indeed, so short was the firing time that later analysis revealed that Marseille fired an average of only 15 rounds per *Abschuss*.

Marseille now returned to Germany to take his scheduled leave and, presumably, collected his Swords at the same time. One anecdote from this period of home leave concerns a visit Marseille is supposed to have made to the cinema. Just before the main film, the latest *Wochenschau*, the weekly newsreel was shown, in which was featured some gun-camera film from the Channel Front. Carried away by the action, Marseille quite forgot himself and started shouting advice to the pilot: 'Aim ahead of him, you bloody fool!' Annoyed by the interruption, other members of the audience turned to stare and one, unaware that he was addressing a *Schwertenträger* of the *JagdwaFFE*, shouted back, 'And just what do you know about it, young man?'

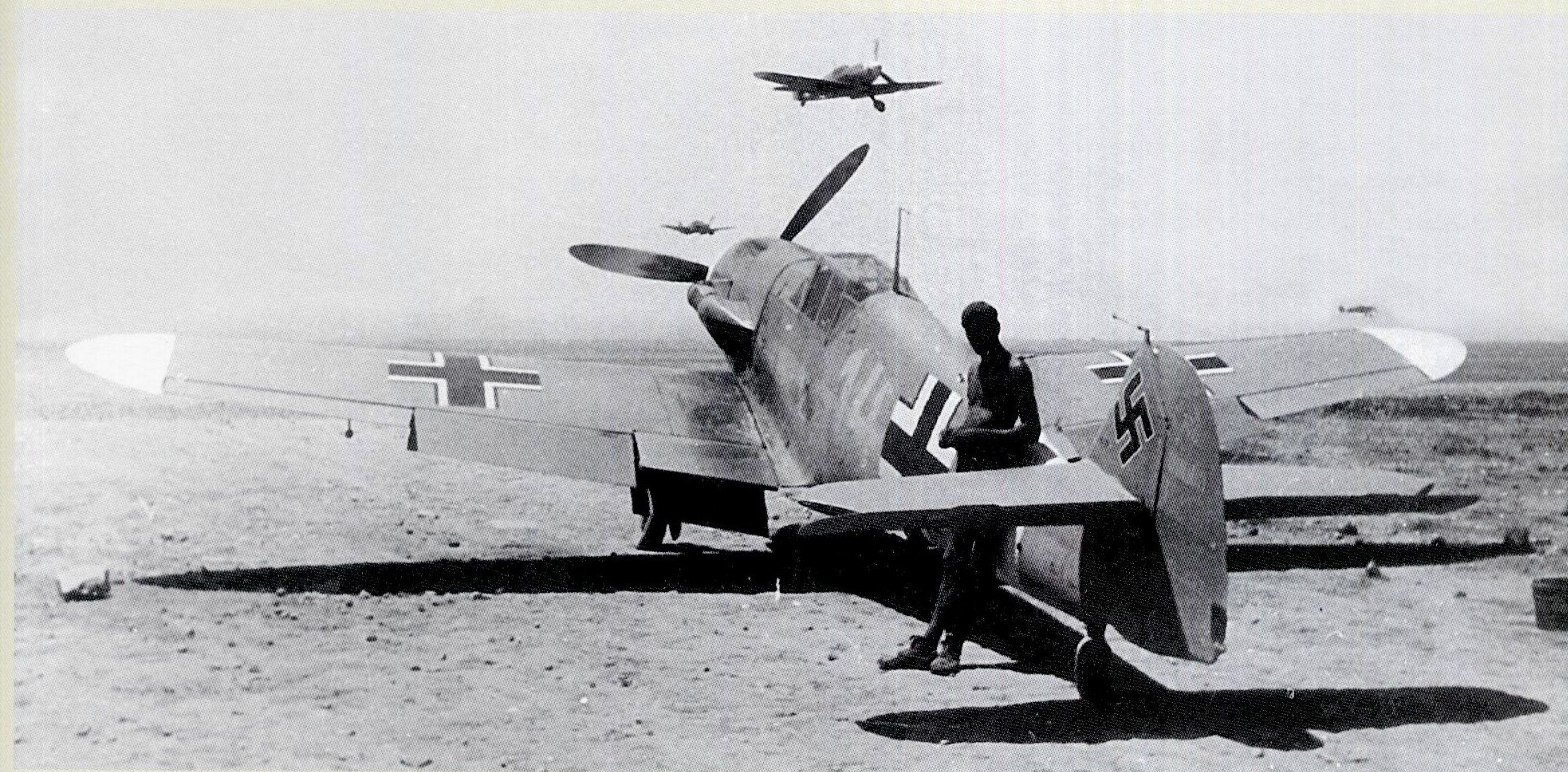
RIGHT, BELOW RIGHT AND BELOW: Taken shortly after Marseille returned to the front following a period of home leave, these photographs show W.Nr 10059, another Bf 109 F-4/Z trop flown by Marseille, returning from a mission on 1 June 1942 during which he accounted for his 68th victory. **(BELOW)** The rudder of this aircraft shown after the 68th yellow Abschussbalken had been added.





Messerschmitt Bf 109 F-4/Z trop 'Yellow 14', W.Nr. 10137, flown by Oblt. Hans-Joachim Marseille of 3./JG 27, June 1942

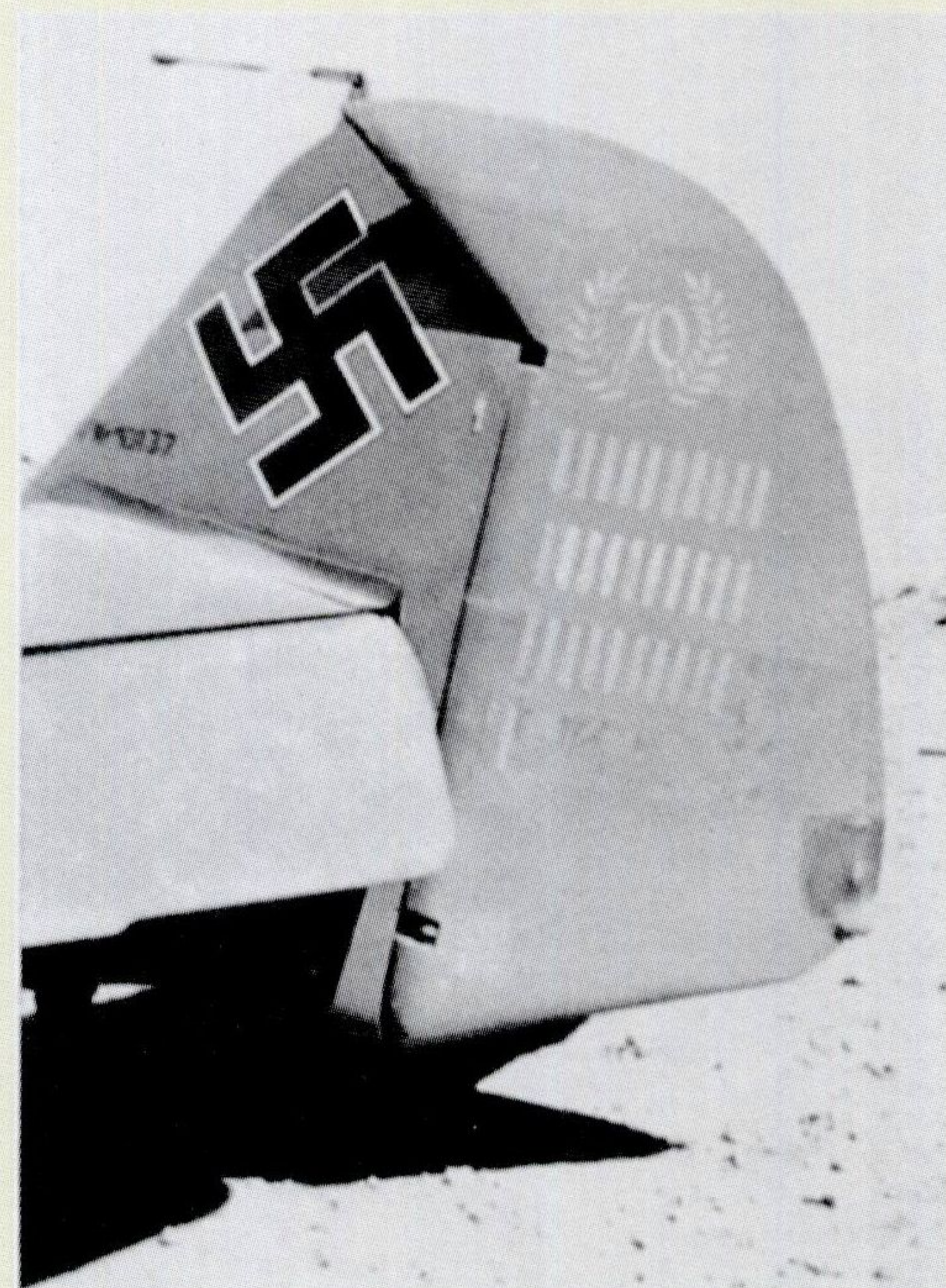
This aircraft was finished in a standard tropical RLM 78 and RLM 79 camouflage scheme with white theatre markings and a yellow identification panel under the nose. Oblt. Marseille was flying this aircraft when he claimed his 81st victory, a P-40 shot down near Mteifel Chebir on 10 June 1942. Note the red dive-bombing line on the canopy side window and the small red-doped area on the rudder.



LEFT: A Schwarm of Bf 109 Fs from I./JG 27 taking off with, in the foreground, Oblt. Marseille's Bf 109 F-4/Z trop W.Nr. 10137. The rudder markings on this machine total 81 and consist of a wreath enclosing the number 70, below which is a row of ten bars followed by a single bar marking the start of another row. All rudder markings were yellow.

BELOW: The rudder of Marseille's Bf 109 F-4/Z trop W.Nr. 10137 showing the wreath and number 70 in more detail, but now marked with a total of 101 victories.

BELOW: Mechanics working on the engine of Oblt. Marseille's W.Nr. 10137. In this view, a cover has been placed over the white spinner.



Marseille returned to North Africa on 23 August 1942, just as Rommel was about to mount an attack on the Alam Halfa positions, hoping to break through at El Alamein and capture Cairo. The attack began shortly before midnight on 30 August with a three-pronged ground assault supported by practically everything which the *Luftwaffe* could put into the air. The air fighting was intense and would become more so as activity increased and the British made full use of their air superiority.

On 31 August, the first day of Rommel's attack, Marseille destroyed two Hurricanes and a Spitfire near El Alamein. However, his most successful and most controversial run of victories really began on 1 September. In the morning, the *Gruppe's* first mission was to provide fighter escort for Ju 87 dive-bombers. After they had bombed their target, the Ju 87s were attacked by ten P-40s and six Spitfires, and during the ensuing air battle Marseille claimed to have destroyed a Spitfire and three P-40s. Marseille's *Staffel* was in the air again a few hours later in the morning when, during another escort mission, I./JG 27 encountered two enemy bomber formations, each with their own fighter escort. Marseille and two other pilots attacked one of the enemy escort formations, which immediately formed a defensive circle. Marseille dived into the circle and shot down two P-40s, causing the circle to break up. Chasing after the P-40s, Marseille caught up with the rearmost machines and shot down another four of them. As his *Schwarm* prepared to return home, another enemy formation was observed and attacked, Marseille accounting for another two P-40s. Incredibly, in all these encounters, whereas only one of the *Gruppe's* other pilots was credited with a single victory, Marseille's total for the day so far was 12. Moreover, the eight aircraft claimed in his latest series of attacks had all been shot down within just ten minutes.

When the aircraft returned, Marseille reported his success and was congratulated by *Feldmarschall* Kesselring who happened to be visiting the unit. Later that afternoon, Marseille took off on the *Gruppe's* final mission of the day, providing close escort for Ju 88s from *Lebrgeschwader* 1. The bombers were intercepted by Hurricanes and P-40s which were immediately engaged by the German escort fighters. In this battle, one pilot of 1. *Staffel* claimed a single victory, two pilots from 2. *Staffel* claimed three more, while Marseille of 3. *Staffel* accounted for all of his *Staffel's* five victories. These latest successes, all within six minutes, brought his personal total for the day to 17 and increased his total score to 121.

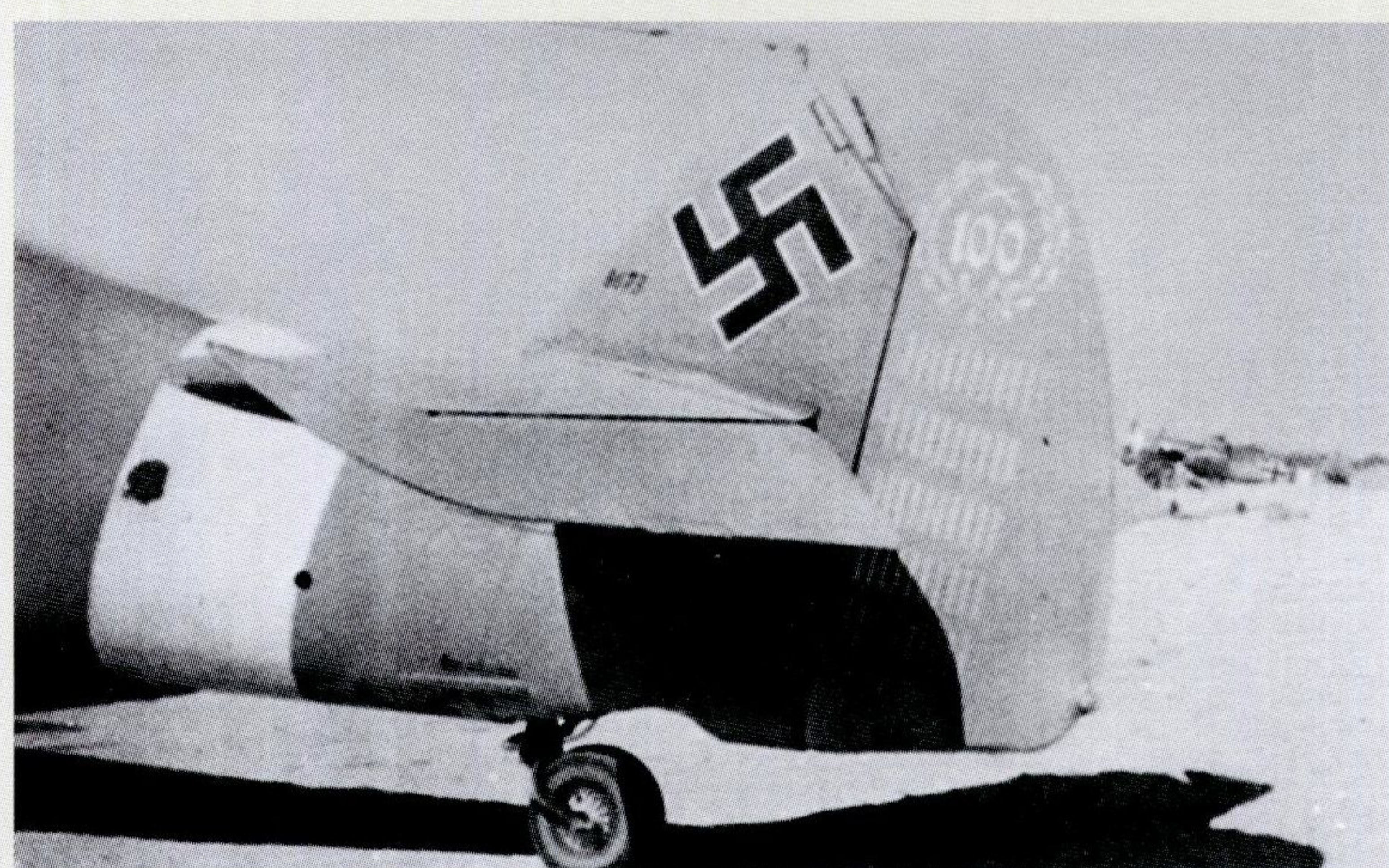
Air activity continued to increase in intensity and the next day, Marseille added another five enemy fighters to his list of victories and was awarded the Diamonds. Although pilot morale in I./JG 27 was high, Marseille realised that, because of his victories, his decorations and the consequent publicity – which had at one time been more than accorded Rommel himself – much was expected of him and the strain was beginning to tell. On 3 September, Marseille was again in action, flying two missions during the day with his friend Lt. Arnold Stahlschmidt, the *Staffelkapitän* of 3./JG 27. Between them, these two pilots claimed 11 of I. *Gruppe's* 14 victories, five of them by Stahlschmidt and six by Marseille. But the German fighters had been outnumbered and the pilots, repeatedly attacked themselves, had flown themselves and their aircraft to the limits of their performance. When they landed, the two friends could hardly find the strength to climb from their cockpits and, after a quick embrace, stood speechless, so exhausted they were unable to utter a single word.

On 7 September, Marseille claimed his 142nd victory, but on the same day Stahlschmidt was shot down. The loss of his friend hit Marseille particularly hard, and it was said that afterwards he was never quite the same. Outwardly he remained friendly, but he said little and looked drawn and tense. In the air, however, he again proved that he had lost none of his skills and, on 15 September, he destroyed another seven Allied fighters within 12 minutes, bringing his score to 151. On 24 September he was promoted to *Hauptmann*, and in three missions flown on the 26th, he destroyed another seven aircraft, one of them a P-40, the rest Spitfires.



ABOVE: Oblt. Marseille in tropical uniform wearing the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves and Swords. On 2 September, he was officially awarded the Diamonds, but it is doubtful if he actually received the decoration itself before his death.

BELOW AND
BELOW RIGHT:
Bf 109 F-4 trop
W. Nr. 8673. Note
the black outline to
the yellow number
'14' and that the
camouflage on this
aircraft has a low
demarcation line.
(BELOW RIGHT)
The rudder
markings on this
aircraft started with
the number 100 in
a wreath to
provide space for
the addition of
further
Abschussbalken.
This photo was
taken after
15 September 1942
when Marseille's
victory tally
totalled 151 and
shows again the
low demarcation
line.

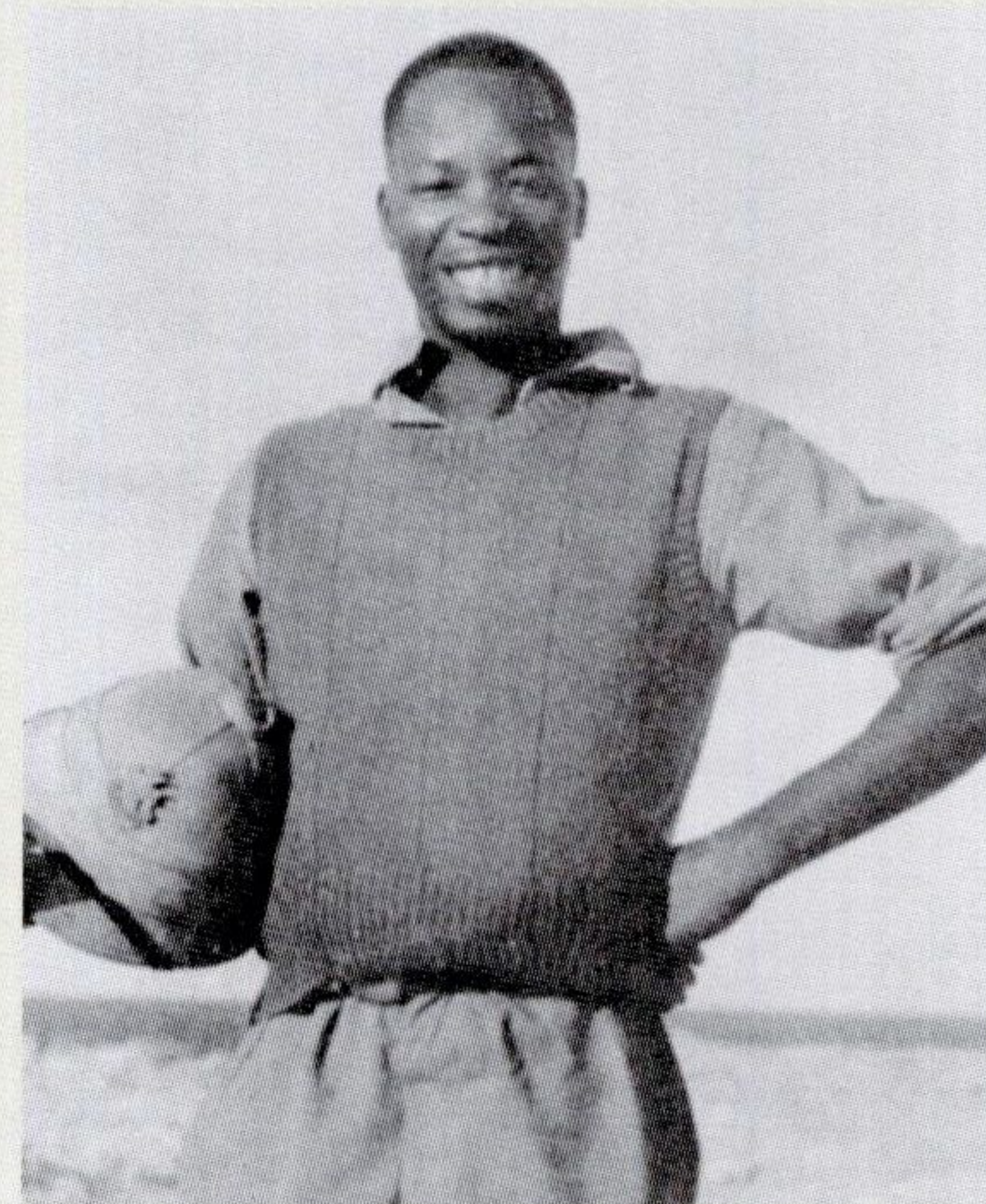


In this last battle, Marseille encountered a very experienced Spitfire pilot and for ten minutes the two aircraft engaged in a deadly turning match. It ended only when Marseille broke away and flew directly into the sun. With the Spitfire pilot temporarily blinded by the glare, Marseille rolled his aircraft slowly about the flight axis of his pursuer and placed himself on the Spitfire's tail. After a quick burst from his armament, the Spitfire plunged to the ground. Marseille's victories now amounted to 158, but when he landed, his face was ashen and he later admitted that in this encounter he thought he had met his match.

Marseille flew his last mission on 30 September 1942 and, as is frequently the case with successful fighter pilots, his death was the result of an accident rather than from contact with the enemy. That morning, a total of 23 Bf 109s from I. and II./JG 27 took part in an escort mission for Ju 87s, Marseille himself flying a new Bf 109 G-2. Once the Ju 87s had bombed their target, the formation began to make their way home, but while still over enemy territory on the return flight, an oil pipe in Marseille's aircraft broke and the engine was set on fire, causing the cockpit to begin filling with smoke. He managed to stay with the aircraft until he was over friendly territory but the heat and the smoke finally compelled him to bale out. He successfully jettisoned his canopy, rolled the aircraft onto its back and was seen to leave the aircraft, but to his comrades' horror, his body plunged to the ground with the parachute unopened. When his remains were recovered and examined, a chest wound revealed that he had been struck by the tail of his aircraft and had probably fallen to the ground unconscious. At the time of his death he was still only 22 years old.

Post-war, many doubts have been raised about Marseille's achievements, questioning whether he was merely a hero manufactured by the Third Reich's efficient propaganda machine and querying especially the 17 victories he claimed on 1 September 1942. Undoubtedly his career was indeed exploited for propaganda purposes, and although some of his claims may have been over-optimistic, this probably resulted from the confusion of air combat rather than any deliberate attempt to inflate his tally. Overclaiming probably did therefore occur, but this was certainly not a phenomenon unique to the *Luftwaffe* and it is now well known that aircrew of all nations had a tendency to submit over-optimistic claims. Although the *Luftwaffe's* claims confirmation system was designed to reduce such instances it was not infallible, but even allowing for probable overclaiming it is still reasonably certain that in his short career Marseille destroyed at least 100 Allied aircraft. In conclusion, therefore, it may be said that whatever the true number of Marseille's victories, he was a remarkable fighter pilot who acquired outstanding skills and was certainly the most successful *Luftwaffe* pilot in the West. At the same time, however, it must be recognised that since he, as with the rest of JG 27, largely failed to protect the Afrika Korps from the Allied bombers attacking it, his victories had little if any impact on the military situation.

BELOW: It would appear that despite the Third Reich's racial theories, Marseille's batman, known only as Matthias, was readily accepted by the members of I./JG 27. After Marseille's death, Matthias remained with the Geschwader and later moved with it to France. His subsequent fate is unrecorded.



prisoner, claiming during his interrogation to have flown 204 operational sorties over Malta and North Africa in the past 10 months. During the same mission, Lt. Jürgen Harder claimed his 18th victory, a Boston, and the only bomber in the 11 aircraft destroyed by the *Gruppe* in the month. Earlier, on the 4th, Oblt. Franz Götz, Kapitän of 9./JG 53, received the *Ritterkreuz* for his 40th *Abschuss* although, in fact, on the day of the award he had already gained three more victories. Götz had served with 9./JG 53 since September 1939 and had claimed victories over France and England in 1940.

After the arrival of the surviving ships from 'Pedestal' and the reinforcement of Malta, the pressure on the island was reduced. At this time, II./JG 53 was despatched to Greece in order to escort the transport aircraft bringing vital supplies to the African mainland, and I./JG 77, re-equipping with Bf 109 G-2s, flew *freie Jagd* missions over Malta. In these missions, only a few machines were damaged and although seven victories were claimed, two pilots were lost, one being captured after being shot down over Malta, and another killed in a flying incident. Strangely, II./JG 53, which was principally engaged in second-line duties, claimed two Beauforts and one Spitfire but suffered higher losses, losing three pilots killed, six aircraft destroyed and others damaged, all mainly in accidents. Some accidents involved the *Gruppe's* new Bf 109 G-2s, at least two of which experienced engine fires during operations.

Operations 'Lightfoot' and 'Supercharge'

After an uninterrupted 18 months in Africa, Rommel's health had deteriorated to the point where it was essential he return to Europe for rest and treatment. During his absence, General Georg Stumme, himself not really fit for tropical service, was to deputise as Army Commander and arrived at Rommel's headquarters on 19 September. On the 23rd, Rommel flew to Italy and several days later, before beginning his rest cure, reported to the *Führer* and stressed in particular the tremendous superiority of the British in the air and the effectiveness of their bombing.

In the first three weeks of October, Lt. General Montgomery and his staff prepared the great offensive which was intended to break through the German defences at El Alamein. The plan called for

a British diversionary attack in the south to draw Axis forces into the area so that the main attack in the north could cut two corridors through extensive minefields, enabling British armoured divisions to pass through and exploit the gaps. Characteristically, Montgomery was determined not to launch his attack until he had absolute superiority, especially in armour and in the air, and in the weeks preceding the operation, Eighth Army was supplied with equipment and weapons which included the new American Sherman tank.

On the Axis side, the situation was far different. On 8 September Rommel had complained that his supply situation had reached crisis proportions, and as the date for Montgomery's planned offensive grew closer, with Eighth Army building up its huge superiority in men, tanks, guns, aircraft and supplies, *Panzerarmee Afrika* remained as critically short as ever.

On 2 October, I./JG 27, having lost some of its best pilots, was sent to Bari and Pachino in Sicily, where they remained until 23 October and participated in the last great aerial offensive over Malta. At the beginning of the month the *Gruppe* had 18 Bf 109 Fs and five Bf 109 Gs, but although its operations were at first limited, its pilots claimed seven Spitfires destroyed over Malta between the 12th and 16 October, two of these being claimed by Lt. Karl von Lieres und Wilkau of 2./JG 27 as his 25th and 26th *Luftsiege*. As usual, the *Gruppe's* Bf 109 G-2s again proved unreliable, and although used extensively, two G-2s were reported lost with their pilots near Malta, one of these being Uffz. Karl Könning who crashed near Gozo on the 18th as a result of an engine problem.

Also still operating over Malta was I./JG 77 which was heavily committed and claimed an incredible 41 Spitfires including nine on 13 October and another 12 the following day. Four victories were awarded in the month to the *Kommandeur*, Heinz Bär, while *ObLt.* Freytag claimed ten and *Ofw.* Brandt four. In addition, *ObLt.* Friedrich Geisshardt, *Staffelkapitän* of 3./JG 77, shot down four Spitfires including one on the 10th which was his 88th victory and the *Gruppe's* 700th. Surprisingly, all these successes were won with limited pilot losses and the *Gruppe's* only casualty that month was Lt. Wilhelm Scheib, an Austrian serving with 1./JG 77 and a veteran of I.(*Jagd*)/LG 2 who had claimed six victories over Russia and five over Malta. He was shot down in flames on 12 October during aerial combat near the island.

Meanwhile, for the first part of the month, II./JG 53 remained in Greece where it acted as fighter escort for naval convoys and the fleets of Ju 52s still struggling to supply Axis forces in North Africa. Losses during these sorties proved light and were restricted to one pilot posted missing in bad weather off the west coast of Greece and a few aircraft damaged. It was at this time that *ObLt.* Gerhard Michalski, formerly *Staffelkapitän* of 4./JG 53, was appointed *Kommandeur* and took command of the *Gruppe*. On 10 October, the *Gruppe* was reinforced by I./JG 53, which arrived via Germany from Pitomnik on the Eastern Front under the command of *Hptm.* Walter Spies, former *Kommandeur* of II./JG 53, to support the Sicilian units over Malta. In fact, the pilots coming from the Russian Front quickly discovered that operating in their new theatre was not easy, tactics and the quality of their opponents being markedly different from in the East although the pilots of II./JG 53 noticed that their *Geschwader* comrades in I. *Gruppe* seemed a lot more operationally tired than the pilots of I./JG 77.

Having left its aircraft behind in Russia, I./JG 53 had re-equipped before moving to Sicily, some pilots flying new Bf 109 Gs, but as this type was still relatively scarce in the Mediterranean, the *Gruppe* also received some new Bf 109 Fs. One of the seven Spitfires claimed over Malta by I./JG 53 in the month was shot down on 16 October by Uffz. Heinz 'Figaro' Golinski. It was, however, the last victory for this young pilot who, at the beginning of the war had been a Messerschmitt test pilot and, although only joining 3./JG 53 at the end of 1941, had already shot down 46 Soviet aircraft between 17 August and 27 September 1942, when he transferred to the Mediterranean. On his last mission, he was flying escort for bombers and, after accounting for his 47th victory, he was himself shot down and killed by another Spitfire. He was posthumously awarded the *Ritterkreuz*.

In the last part of October, II./JG 53 claimed eight victories but lost five pilots over Malta, one of which became a PoW. Even the *Kommandeur*, *ObLt.* Michalski, who had claimed two victories earlier in the month, was himself shot down during combat with a Spitfire on the 15th but was rescued unhurt by a Do 24 of the *Seenotdienst*.

Meanwhile, the three *Jagdgruppen* in the Egyptian desert, II. and III./JG 27 and III./JG 53, had to face heavy rains as well as overwhelming enemy forces. Here, II./JG 27 had taken over the Bf 109 G-2s left behind by I. *Gruppe*, to which were added five more G-2s later in the month. In the period between the 1st and 22 October, the *Gruppe* claimed 23 *Luftsiege*, all except a B-25 and a Beaufighter being fighters. Particular highlights occurred on 9 October when II./JG 27 claimed 12



ABOVE: When attacks against German positions and airfields intensified prior to the battle of El Alamein, the building of aircraft blast bays was ordered with all speed and with the employment of all available forces. This matter was of extreme urgency as losses on the ground due to RAF bombing were increasing to an intolerable level.

reinforcements and repaired aircraft arriving from the rear partly filled the gaps, this comparison illustrates the heavy losses in machines the German fighters suffered in the desert.

On 11 October, the *Gruppenkommandeur*, Erhard Braune left III./JG 27 and was replaced by *Hptm.* Ernst Düllberg, previously the *Adjutant* with *Stab*/JG 27, who had 16 victories. By the end of the month, Düllberg had claimed another two victories and then, in the longest period of command known in the *Gruppe*, remained as *Kommandeur* for nearly two years.

At Quotaifiya, III./JG 53 was bombed on the 9th and 22 October, losing at least three Bf 109 Fs destroyed while another eight were damaged. Two pilots were killed in action, one being *Ofw.* Werner 'Stumpen' Stumpf of 9./JG 53 who, on 13 October, had just achieved his 46th, 47th and 48th victories before being himself shot down by anti-aircraft guns near El Alamein. Before the war, Stumpf had been a *Luftwaffe* driver but trained as a pilot and joined 9./JG 53, taking part in the Western campaign and flying in the Battle of Britain before being awarded the Knight's Cross on 13 August 1942 with 40 victories.

General Montgomery's great battle of El Alamein, Operation 'Lightfoot', began on the night of 23/24 October with an artillery barrage by some 750 guns. Twenty minutes later, XXX Corps advanced to push two corridors through the minefields and into the enemy lines to the north, while XIII Corps began a diversionary attack to the south. By

victories, and the 20th when another five were destroyed. Losses amounted to two pilots killed in action, four aircraft totally destroyed and others damaged to various degrees. III./JG 27, still equipped with the Bf 109 F, had only 16 aircraft at the beginning of October yet up until the 22nd had claimed 10 *Abschüsse* but lost two pilots taken prisoner and one, *Lt.* Erich Schöfböck, the *Staffelkapitän* of 7./JG 27 credited with 13 victories, was listed as missing. At least 15 Bf 109 Fs were destroyed, almost the entire strength of the *Gruppe* at the beginning of the month, and while

BELOW: Allied anti-aircraft fire claimed the life of *Ritterkreuzträger* *Ofw.* Werner Stumpf of 9./JG 53 at El Alamein on 13 October, shortly after he had shot down his 46th, 47th and 48th victories. At the time of his death, Stumpf had flown more than 400 missions and was a veteran of the Battle of Britain and the campaign in Russia.



BELOW: The sky at El Alamein brilliantly illuminated during the Allied barrage on the night of 23/24 October 1942 when, as if fired by a single hand, nearly 750 guns roared out, tearing the sky into crimson shreds. Guns bounced in their pits and before they had come to rest a new shell was slammed into the breach. The entire front was a solid mass of flickering lights, and the ground shook with endless concussions while the air overhead was filled with the gentle sighing of the shells as they sped towards the enemy.



dawn, most of XXX Corps had reached their objectives but although armoured divisions were advancing down the corridors, progress was far slower than expected and even a continuous week-long tank battle did not allow Montgomery's forces to make their final push. The deadlock was broken on 2 November when Montgomery launched Operation 'Supercharge' with two infantry brigades, one armoured brigade and an armoured division. These finally forced Rommel, who had returned to take command in Africa on 25 October only to find his army almost out of fuel and ammunition, to withdraw with heavy losses on the night of 3/4 November.

As soon as Montgomery's offensive at El Alamein began, I./JG 27 had been recalled from Malta to North Africa, landing at Tobruk on 25 October before moving up to Tanyet-Harun. By this time, the *Gruppe* had been completely re-equipped with Bf 109 G-2s and was subsequently in action continuously until 12 November. In this period, pilot casualties amounted to two pilots killed or missing and at least three others wounded, while seven Bf 109 were lost and others severely damaged. Although 13 victories and a *Herausschuss* against a B-24 were claimed, the *Gruppe* was completely exhausted. In two weeks, its strength had been reduced by half, leaving no more than six machines operational. The *Gruppe* then assembled at Arco Philaenorum before departing from Africa for good, the pilots leaving their handful of surviving 'Gustavs' to other units. Also left behind were the many comrades who had met their death in Africa. Thus ended a period in the history of I./JG 27 which, at the beginning of 1941, had been the first German fighter *Gruppe* to arrive in North Africa in support of an expeditionary force led by a young – and then almost unknown – General Erwin Rommel.

Another unit leaving Africa, but not for the last time, was III./JG 53. After abandoning its aircraft to other units at Quotaifiya, at the end of October the *Gruppe* transferred to Bari in Italy where the pilots were retrained on brand-new Bf 109 G-4s.

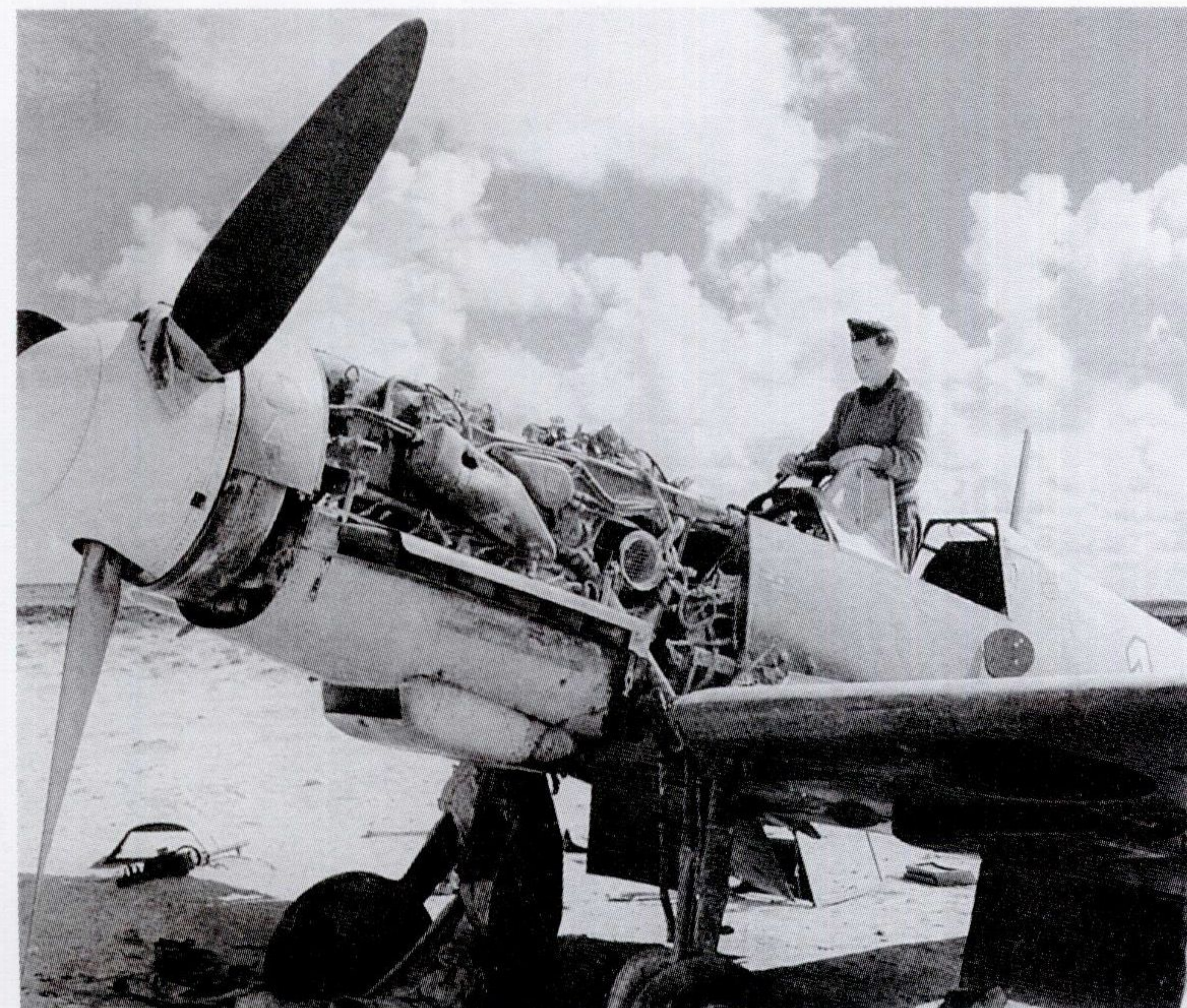
Also recalled from Malta to support the German and Italian forces facing the attacks at El Alamein was I./JG 77 which, on 25 October, flew to Bir-el-Abd where its pilots landed for the first time on African soil. There they joined other units of *Jagdgeschwader* 77 which had arrived in Africa to relieve the exhausted JG

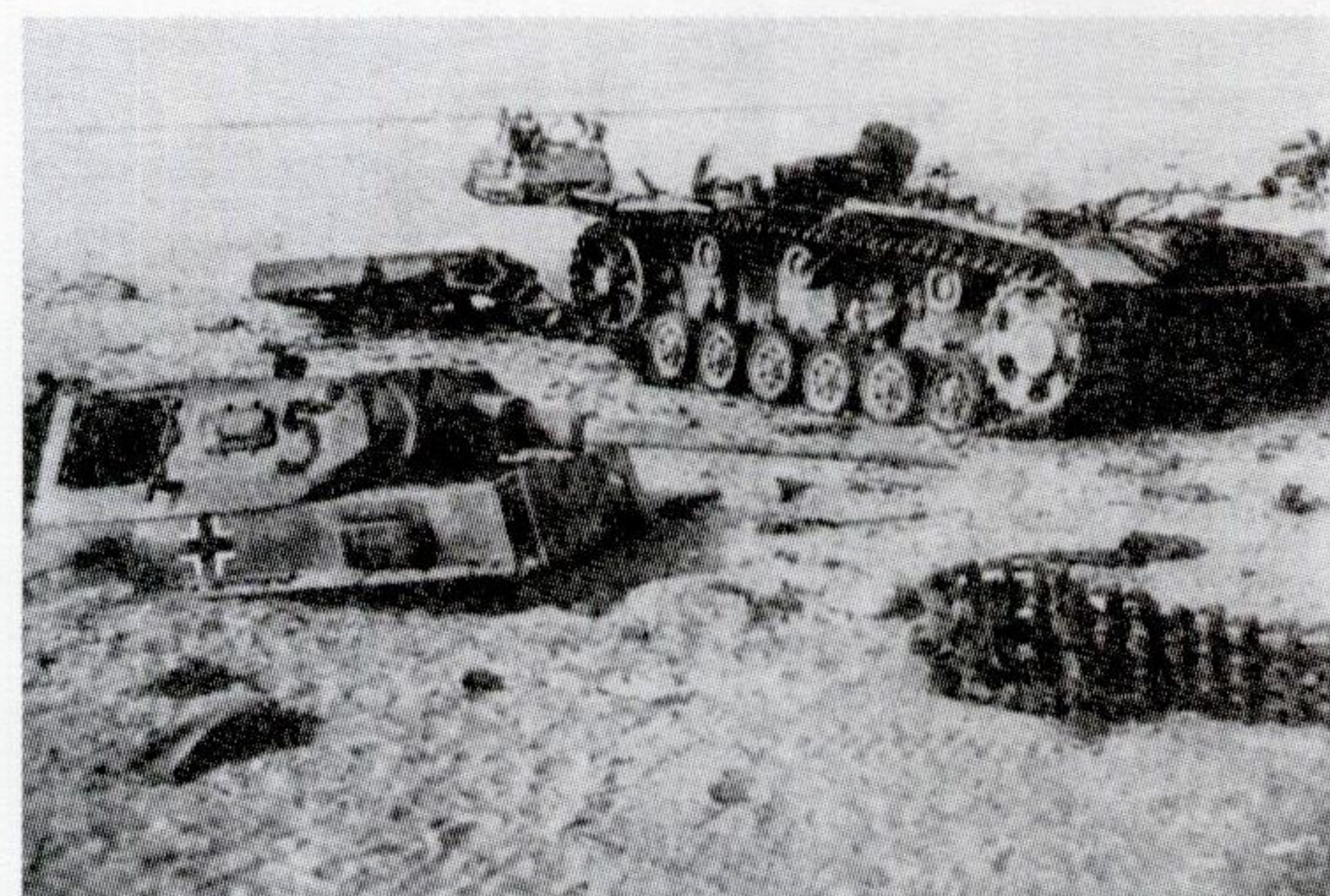
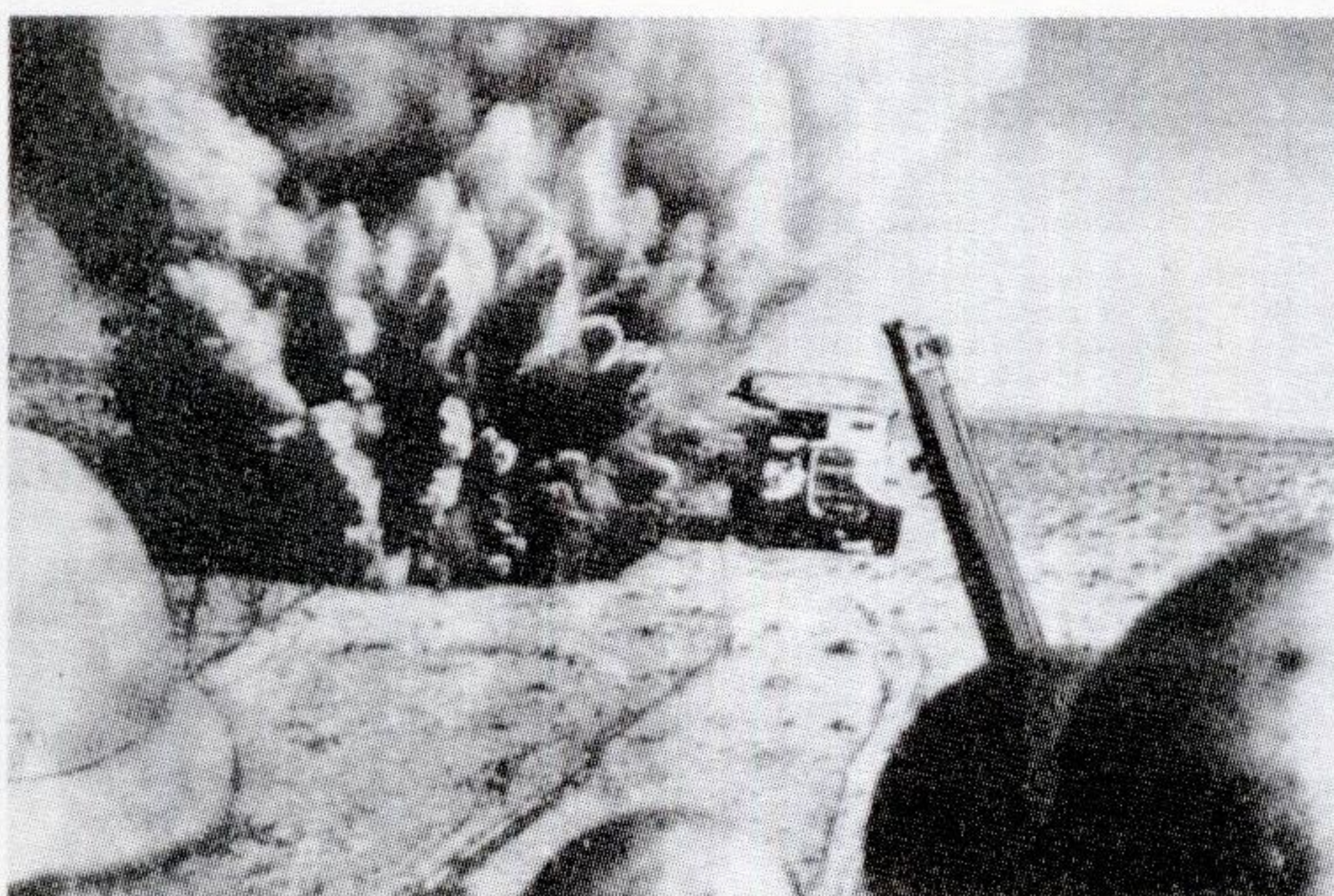
27. After leaving the Eastern Front, III./JG 77 under *Hptm.* Kurt Ubben had arrived at Munich, the so-called gateway to the South, on the 19th. Major Joachim Müncheberg and his *Stab*/JG 77 also arrived in Africa, Müncheberg having earlier served in the Mediterranean in 1941 while leading 7./JG 26 which had largely operated against Malta from airfields in Sicily. By 27 October, III./JG 77 had reached Tanyet-Harun, but on the way, *Hptm.* Wolfdieter Huy, *Staffelkapitän* of 7.(Jabo)/JG 77 and a holder of the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves, had landed with his *Staffel* on Crete. By chance, he met *Feldmarschall* Albert Kesselring, *Oberbefehlshaber Süd*, and, in a very brief conversation, learned that the situation was utterly desperate. Kesselring, who had earlier supported Operation 'Herkules' and the capture of Malta, knew that insufficient supplies were reaching North Africa to save the German and Italian forces and that JG 77 was being sent into a hopeless situation.



ABOVE: Apart from problems of supply, Rommel's offensives and counter-offensives at El Alamein suffered under non-stop attacks by the RAF, which had almost complete command of the air. This activity reached its climax when Montgomery began his offensive at El Alamein and between 26 October and 4 November 1942, the RAF flew over 10,000 sorties against some 1,500 flown by the Luftwaffe. On some days, the RAF mounted 800 bomber sorties, against which the Luftwaffe could fly at the most an average of 60 dive-bomber and 100 fighter sorties. Here, a squadron of Baltimore light bombers lays a carpet of bombs over Panzerarmee's forces. Such attacks were particularly effective against motorised forces caught without cover in the open desert. Despite high claims against the light bombers' fighter escort, the Jagdwaffe was only rarely in a position to attack the bombers.

BELOW: A captured Bf 109 F-4 trop, 'White 1', probably of I./JG 27, being examined by a member of the RAF. This photograph is believed to have been taken in late October or early November 1942, shortly before the *Gruppe* re-equipped with the Bf 109 G-2 and left the Mediterranean theatre.





ABOVE: A convoy of British motorised infantry, widely spread out to avoid casualties in case of air attack, moving into action. Around them stretches the vast expanse of the desert. Note the tripod-mounted Bren gun for air defence.

ABOVE CENTRE: The Eighth Army advances in Egypt. Here motorised infantry move forward through shell-fire.

Nevertheless, from the end of October until Axis troops were pushed out of Egypt on 11 November, JG 77 was very active. Once again, pilots arriving from Russia discovered the difference between combat in the East compared with their new conditions in the desert. While engagements on the Eastern Front often took place at low altitude and invariably involved only small Soviet formations, over Africa the German fighters had to fly so high that the sands of the coast and the blue of the Mediterranean Sea below looked like a map, and they were now facing very much larger Allied fighter and bomber formations. Although *Hptm.* Huy shot down a Spitfire, his 40th *Luftsieg*, on 28 October, he was himself shot down the following day by another Spitfire south of El Alamein. Captured by troops of the Greek Sacred Battalion, he spent the rest of the war in a PoW Camp in Egypt. Huy was one of four JG 77 pilots shot down in two weeks of permanent engagements at the beginning of November, a not excessive number when compared with the 68 victories claimed by *Stab*, I. and III./JG 77 in the same period. *Hptm.* Heinz Bär shot down his 118th victim on 2 November, and by 11 November had increased his tally to 130 *Abschüsse*. On 27 October, *Ofw.* Herbert Kaiser of 8./JG 77 was credited with two P-40s – JG 77's first two desert victories – and soon added another two, bringing his score to 54. On 4 November, *Oblt.* Friedrich Geisshardt, *Kapitän* of 3./JG 77, was credited with four P-40s, shot down another two the following day and, on 10 November, attained the symbolic figure of 100 *Abschüsse*. Apart from Huy, another notable pilot lost was *Lt.* Konrad Fels, a veteran of I.(Jagd)/LG 2 then flying with 2./JG 77, who had shot down a fighter over Malta and three more over Egypt before being himself reported missing on 10 November. He had ten aerial victories. Unlike pilot losses, material losses were high, amounting to at least 30 Bf 109 G-2s of which 12 were lost in combat and five were destroyed by bombing. As Allied troops advanced, all units were forced back from one airfield to another and any aircraft which could not be repaired in a few hours had to be destroyed to prevent it from being captured intact. Thirteen of JG 77's Bf 109s were destroyed in this way.

Jagdgeschwader 77's II. *Gruppe* was also involved in heavy fighting in Egypt, claiming 19 victories in the first 11 days of November, seven of them by *Hptm.* Rödel. On the 1 November, the unit's strength return shows it had 14 Bf 109 F-4s and eight G-2s, and although the *Gruppe* lost only one pilot in the next two weeks, in the same period a total of 20 Bf 109 F-4s and G-2s – practically its entire compliment of aircraft – was destroyed, eight of these being blown up by German forces as they left Quotaifiya.

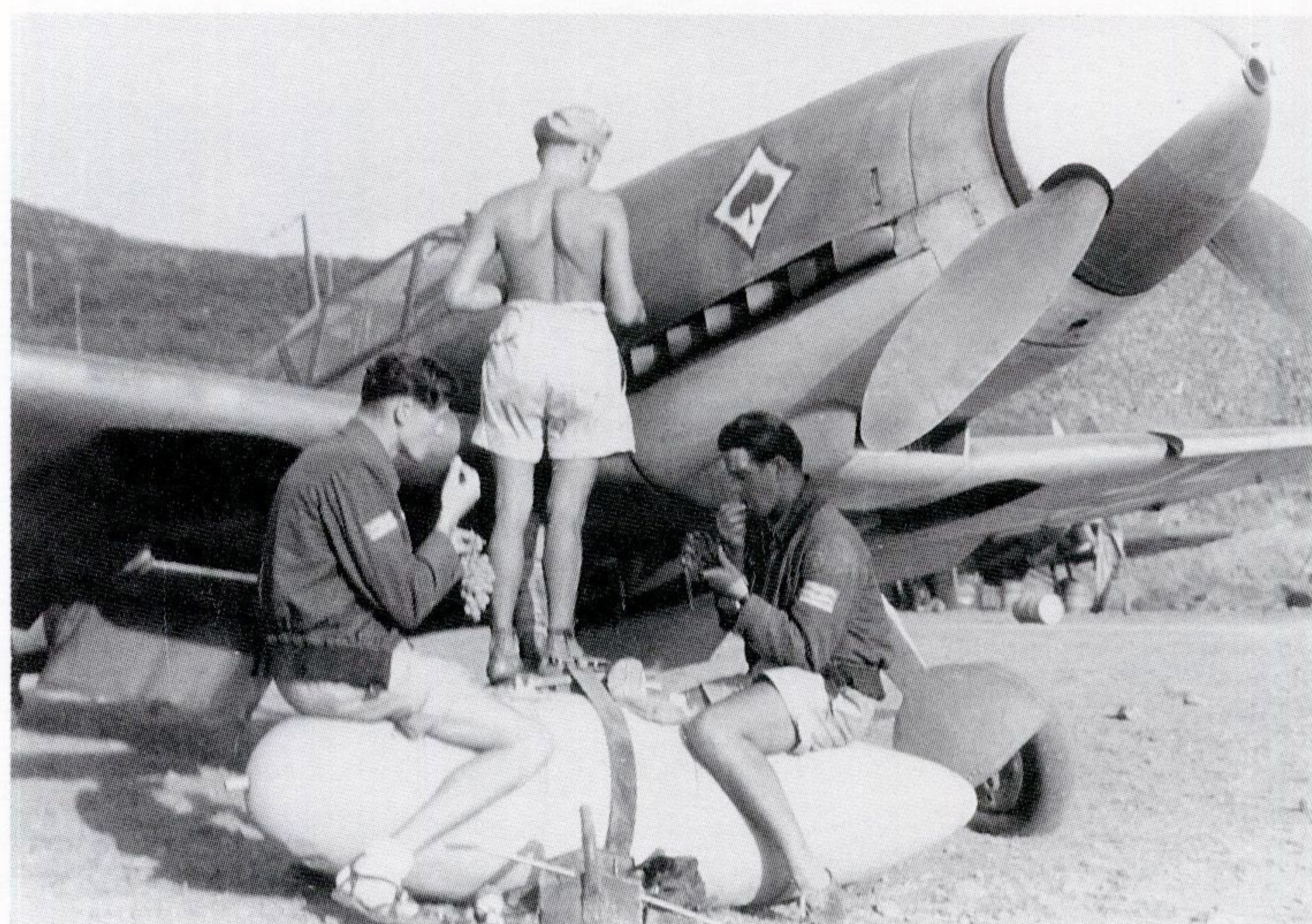
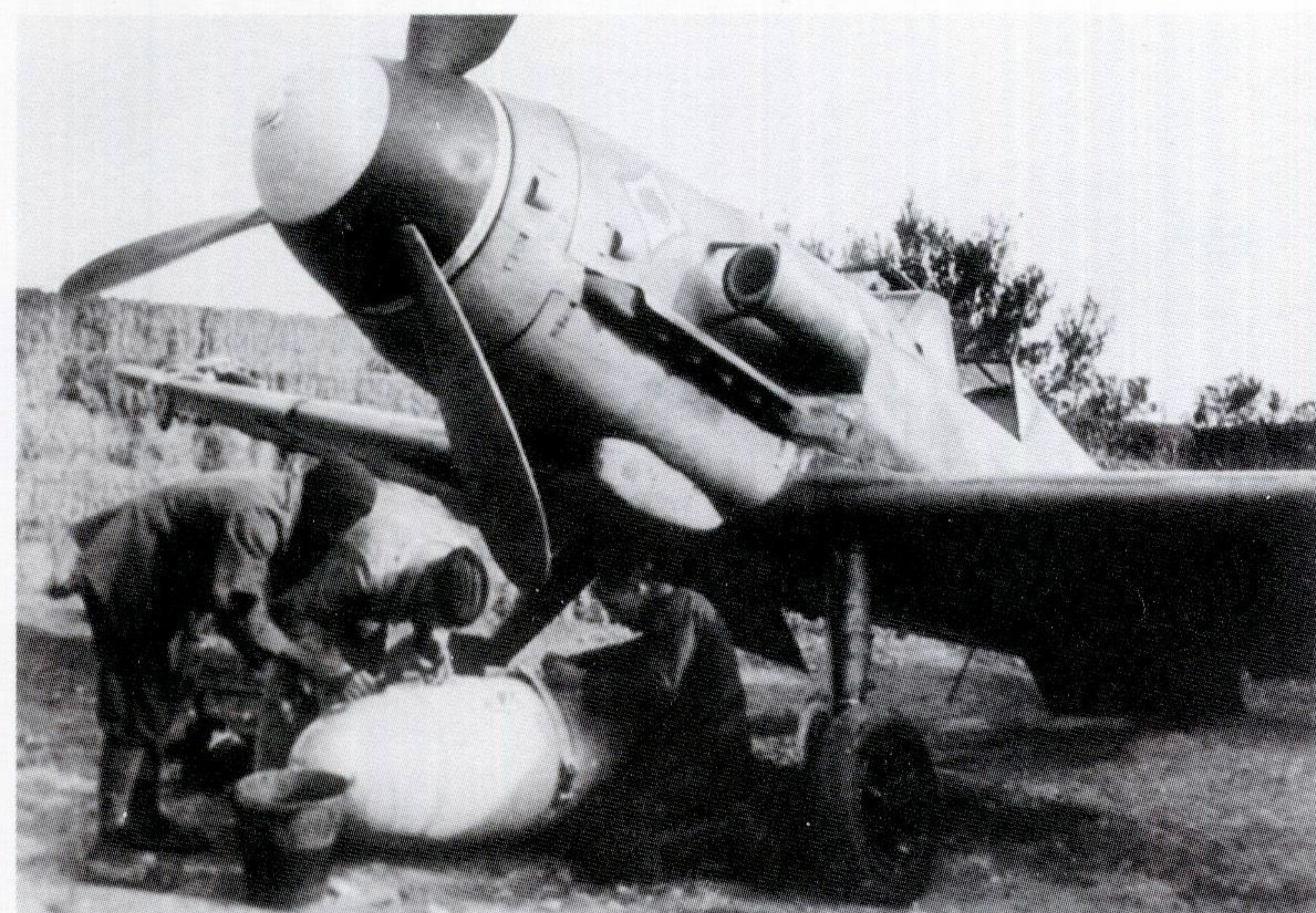
III./JG 77, equipped solely with the Bf 109 F-4 *trop*, also lost only one pilot, *Lt.* Eberhardt Schmitt of the *Gruppenstab*, who was killed in the Benghazi area while attacking a B-24. Only four of the *Gruppe*'s aircraft were destroyed but it lost some of its ground personnel either killed – the *Gruppe* seems often to have been the victim of bombings – or captured. Ten claims were made which included two Liberators on 4 November, one of which was by *Oblt.* Werner Schroer of 8./JG 27 as his first four-engined bomber but his sixth victory in two weeks and his 60th *Luftsieg* in total.

Also called to Africa at the beginning of the El Alamein offensive was I./JG 53 equipped with Bf 109 G-2s, but this *Gruppe* was ordered to protect the important harbours of Tobruk and Benghazi, where supplies were being landed, against formations of B-24s. There were no combat losses or victory claims, but on 10 November, *Uffz.* Erich Juhls of 2./JG 53 collided with a Ju 52 while taking off and was killed. He had been credited with ten victories, including a Spitfire shot down the month previously over Malta.

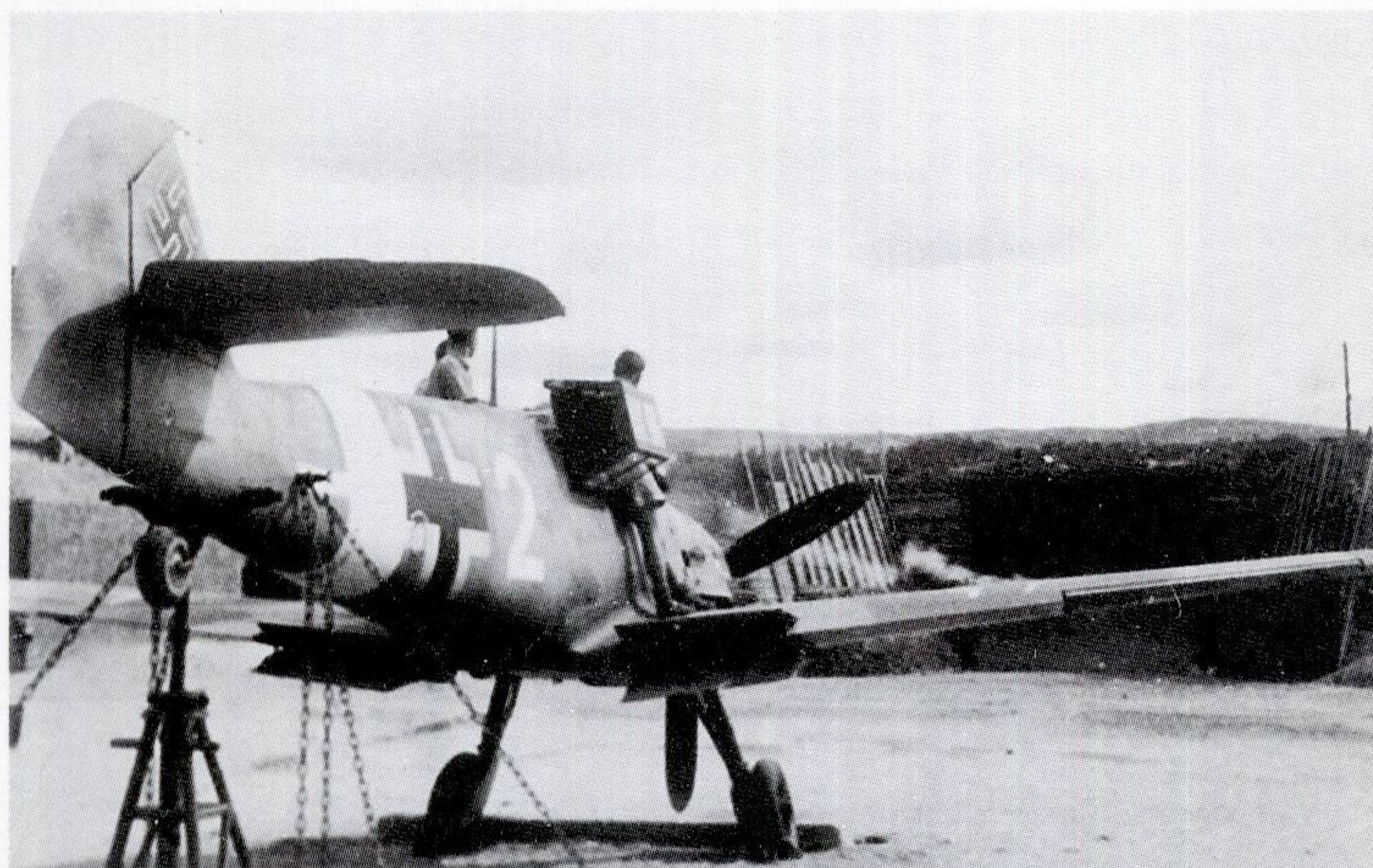
Also connected with the vital matter of supplies was II./JG 53 which escorted and protected Ju 52s flying back and forth between Greece, Crete and Africa. No pilots were killed and the five aircraft lost or damaged were the result of accidents or technical problems.

ABOVE: The crew of an Allied Bren carrier pauses during the advance from El Alamein to view a destroyed PzKpfw III. Every vehicle lost was of significant importance to Rommel since, for example, on 4 November, Eighth Army could put in the field very nearly 600 tanks, whereas the Germans had 80, of which just 20 were serviceable. As a result of ULTRA decrypts, Rommel's shortage of armour and his supply difficulties were known to Montgomery who, nevertheless, failed to fully exploit these weaknesses and advanced only slowly and cautiously.

BELOW: Bf 109 G of JG 53 being prepared for a sortie.



ABOVE: Two pilots of II./JG 53 use the drop tank from a Bf 109 F as seat and table while they enjoy some Sicilian grapes in the late Summer of 1942. Seated on the left is Lt. Hans Märklstetter who at this time had a single victory, a Spitfire which he had claimed on 17 May.

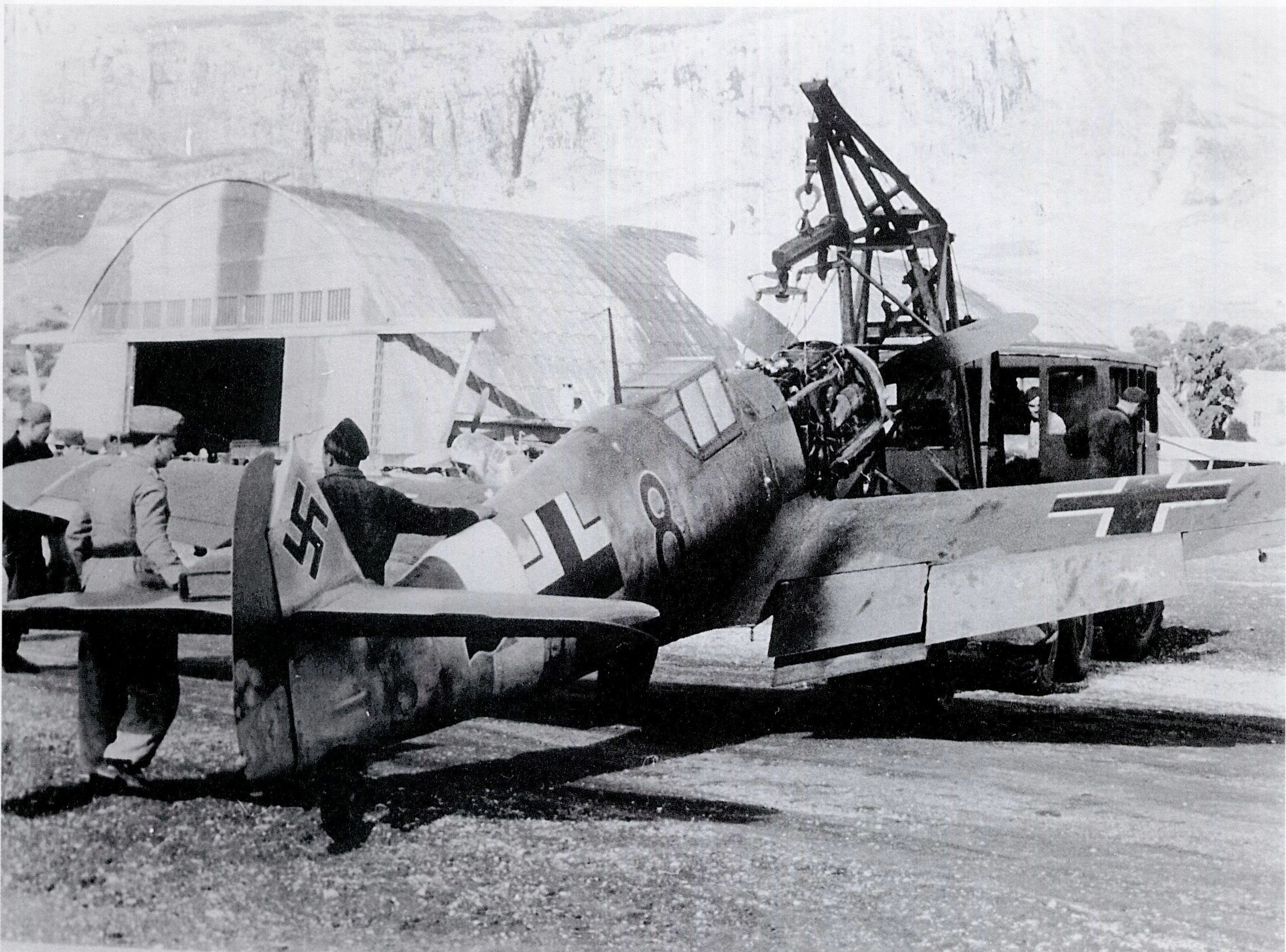


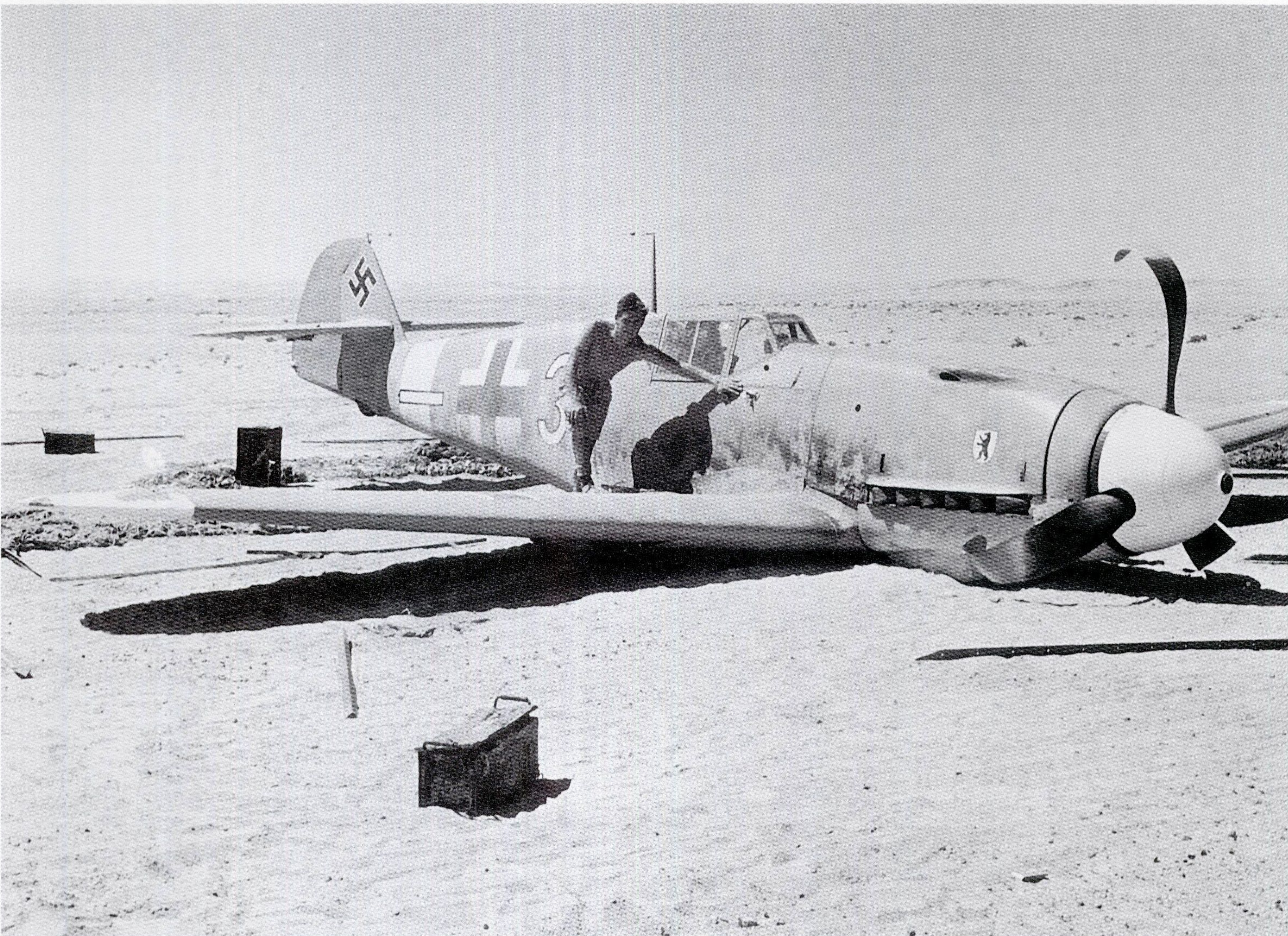
LEFT AND BELOW: JG 53 is believed to have begun modifying the standard scheme on its aircraft in the Summer of 1942 and such a modification may be seen in these photographs showing 'White 2' of 4./JG 53 jacked up and having its weapons adjusted. In both photographs it is evident that the original finish on this machine was quite dark but that a lighter, sand colour, has been added leaving patches of the earlier colour. This is particularly noticeable around the fuselage Balkenkreuz and the white fuselage band where the painter has not sprayed too close to the original markings for fear of obscuring them. Unfortunately, in these views, it is not possible to determine whether or not the wing upper surfaces were similarly oversprayed.





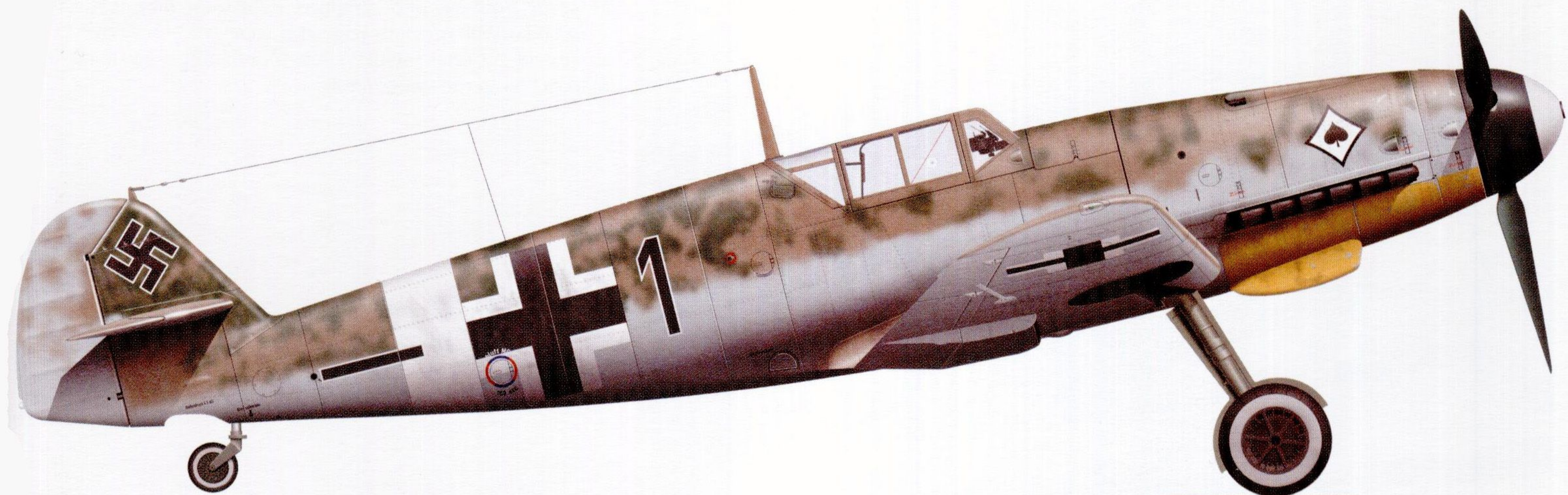
LEFT AND BELOW: This Bf 109 G-2 coded 'Black 8', possibly photographed at Trapani in September 1942, is believed to have served with JG 53 and has clearly had the uppersurface of at least the starboard wing repainted. Note also the slightly wavy bar which is presumed to be a variation of the II. Gruppe bar. It must be said, however, that at the time the photograph is supposed to have been taken, II./JG 53 was using a flat horizontal bar as a Gruppe symbol. Nevertheless, if this is an aircraft of II. Gruppe, then the machine would have served with 5./JG 53. The III./JG 53 was at this time using a vertical bar as a Gruppe identifier.





ABOVE AND RIGHT: On the morning of 20 September 1942, P-40 fighter-bombers of 112 Sqn took off escorted by eight P-40s of 250 Sqn to carry out an attack against Axis targets. Four Bf 109 Fs of 4./JG 27 were scrambled to intercept the P-40s and attacked them just as the fighter-bombers completed their bombing. As 'White 3', flown by Fw. Alfred Krumlauf, dived towards the fighter-bombers, it was attacked and damaged by three of the escorting P-40s which obliged Fw. Krumlauf to make a crash-landing in the desert 15 km south-west of El Hammam where he was taken prisoner. His aircraft was later recovered by the British and in these photographs Fw. Krumlauf's W.Nr. 8635 may be seen in its crash position and (**BELOW**) being removed by an RAF recovery team.



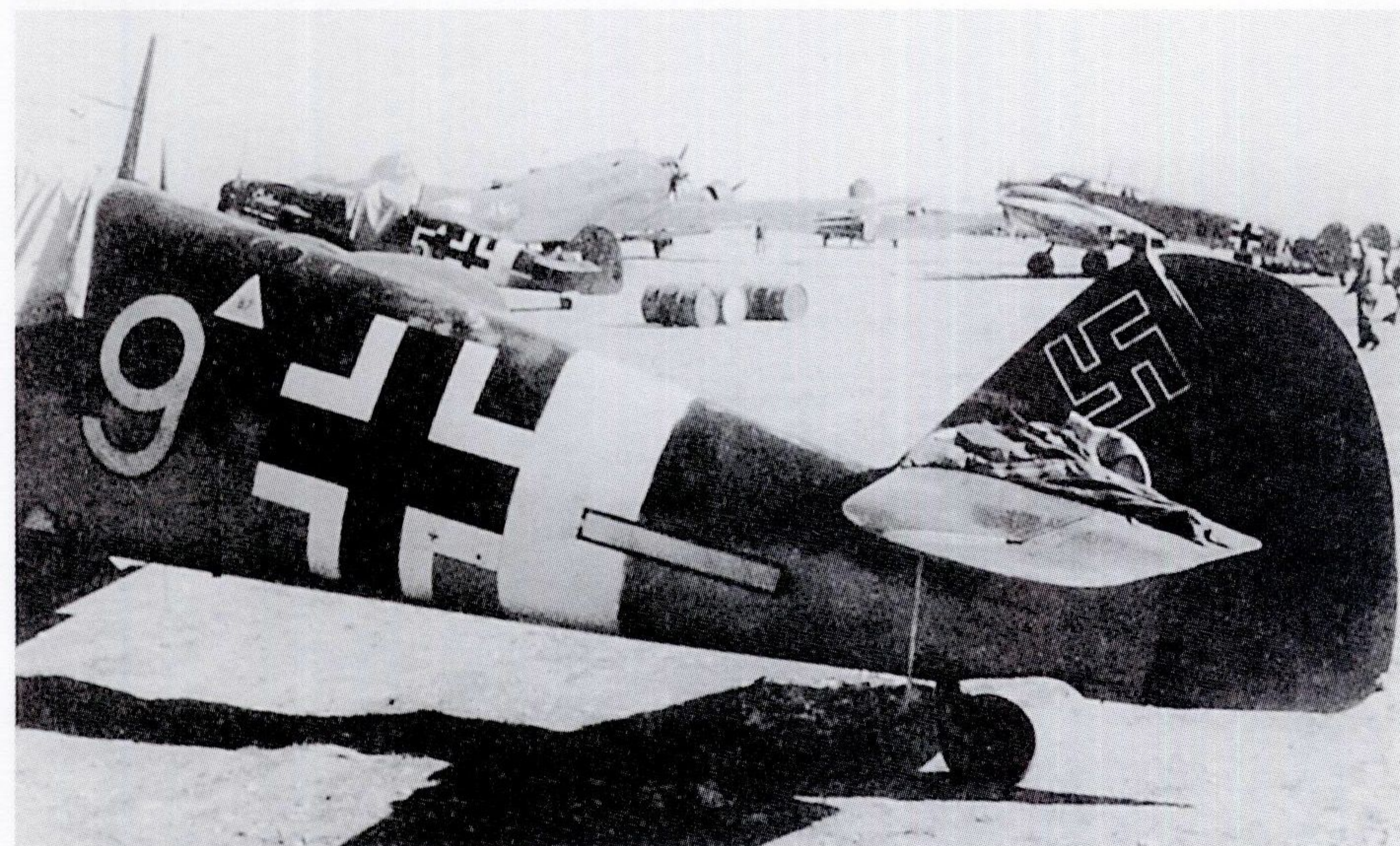


Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-2 trop 'Black 1' of 5./JG 53, Comiso, October 1942

As mentioned in the photograph caption, the camouflage on this machine is believed to have been a brown and green scheme with the upper surfaces of the wings and tailplane finished in a segmented pattern. The upper parts of the fuselage down to a mid-demarcation dividing line appear to have been brown oversprayed with dark green mottles. The undersurfaces were probably left in the original RLM 76. The undersurface of the engine cowling was yellow and the spinner was almost certainly dark green with a white tip.

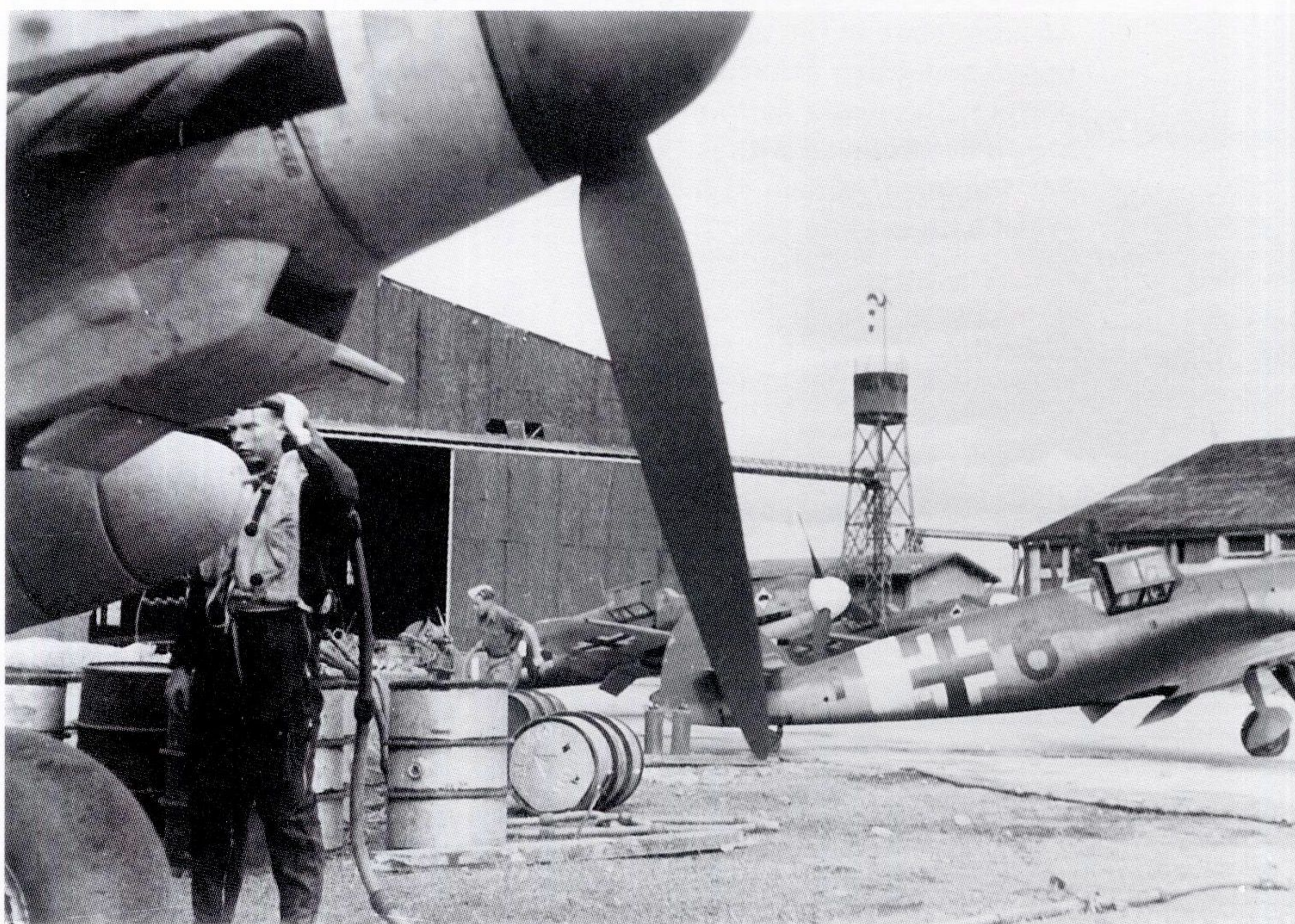


ABOVE: Luftwaffe personnel at Comiso in October 1942 with, behind them, a Bf 109 G-2 of 5./JG 53 coded 'Black 1'. The particularly dark upper surface camouflage on this machine is believed to consist of a brown and dark green scheme applied over the usual RLM 74/75/76 European colours.



LEFT: Probably photographed at the same time as the scene on the previous page, this view also shows the airfield at Comiso with 'Yellow 9', a Bf 109 G-2 trop of 6./JG 53 in the foreground.

RIGHT: Possibly also taken at Comiso, this photograph shows aircraft of III./JG 53 including 'Red 6' of 8. Staffel. The style of spinner painting varied at this time. In this photograph, the machine in the foreground appears to have an all-green spinner while that in the background is completely white. Another style noted at this time consisted of a green rear section and backplate with the front of the spinner forward of the seam line painted white.

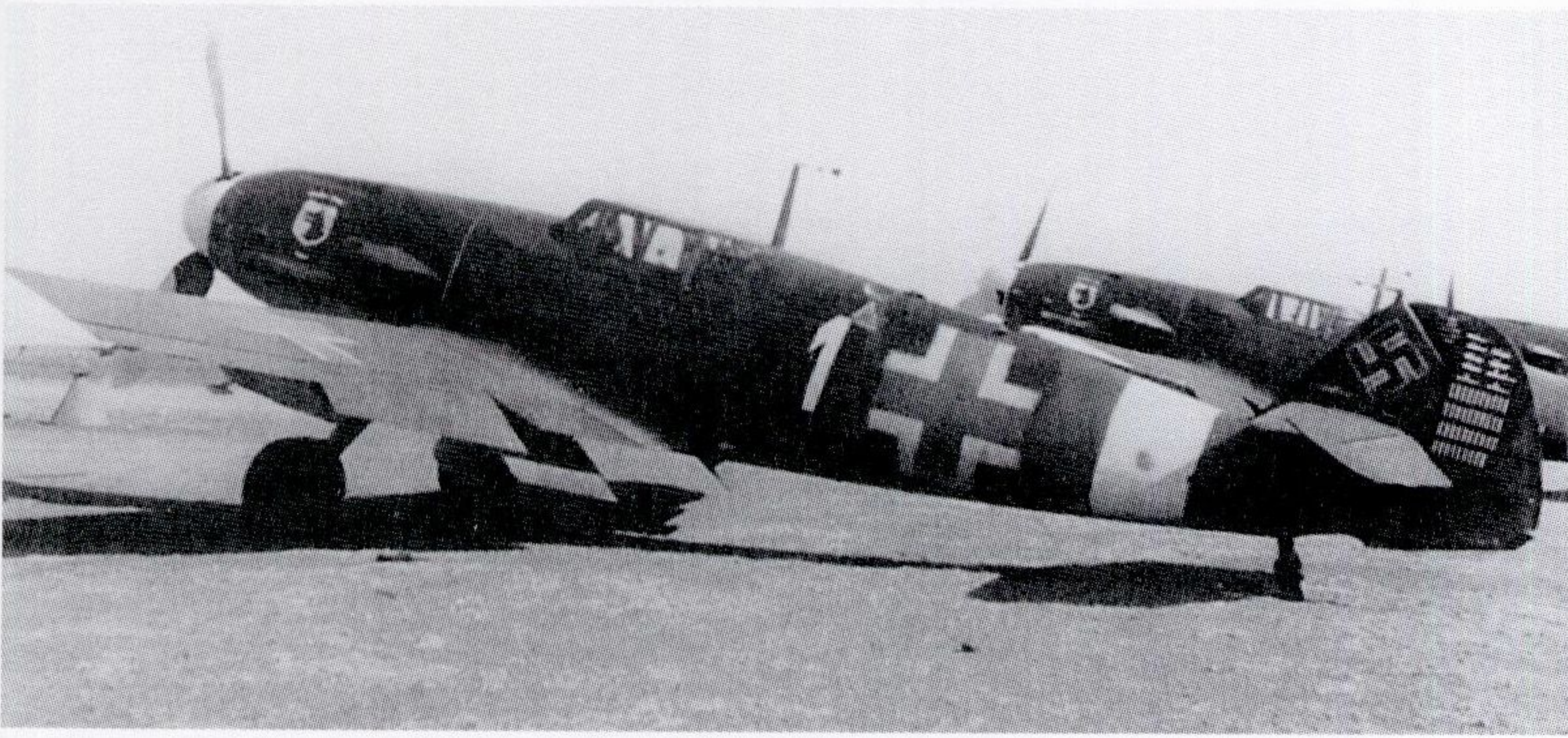


BELOW: Ground staff of 6./JG 27 preparing MG 151 ammunition. High-explosive, tracer, armour-piercing and incendiary shells etc were available and pilots frequently requested their own special loading sequence.

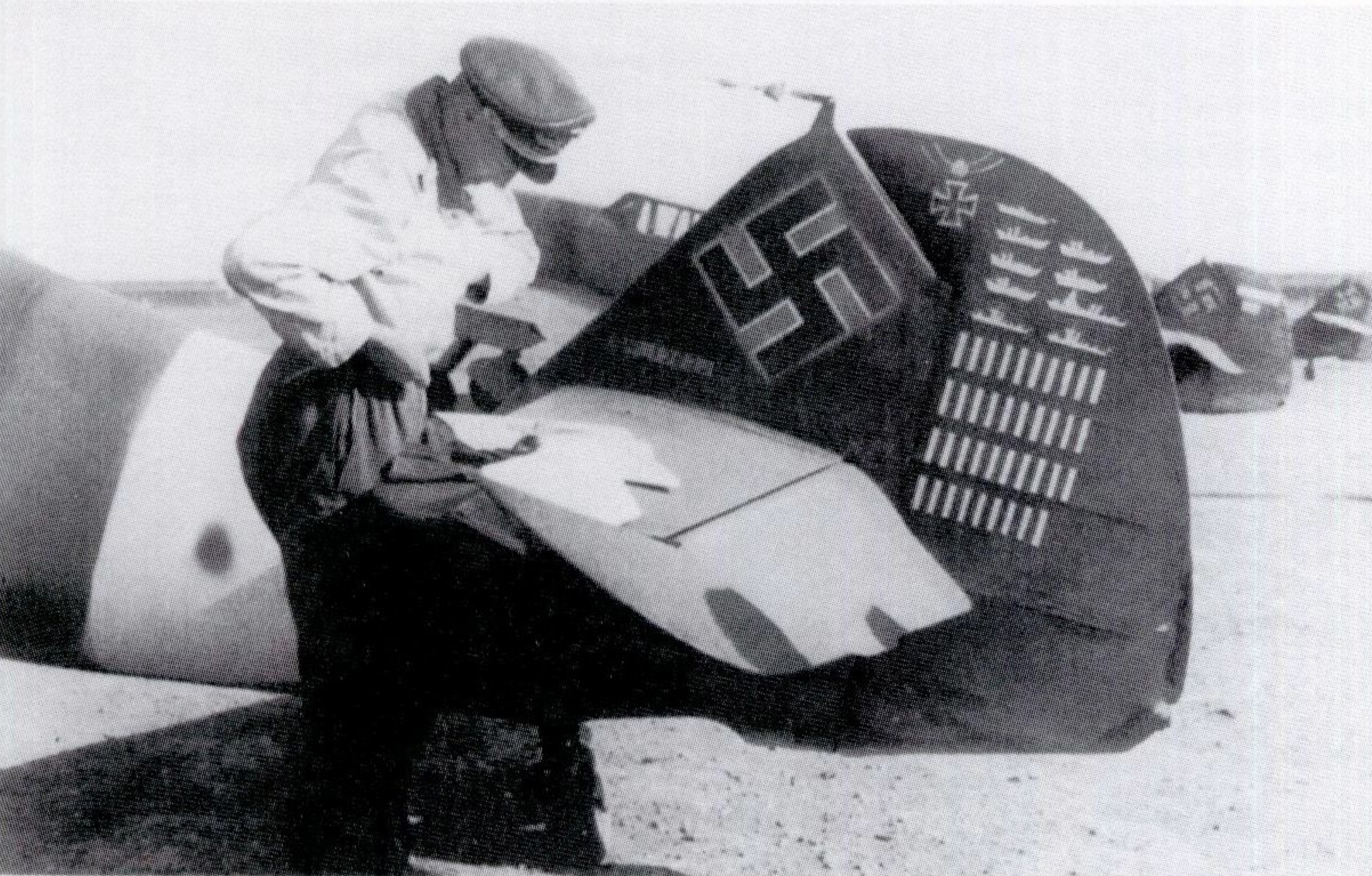


BELOW: The III./JG 77 was already transferring to relieve the exhausted JG 27 in North Africa when Eighth Army opened its offensive at El Alamein in October 1942. This photograph shows Oblt. Emil Omert, the Staffelfkapitän 8./JG 77, at the large and dusty airfield at Arco Philaenorum, shortly after arriving in Africa.





LEFT AND LEFT BELOW: Taken on 25 October 1942, these photographs show Hptm. Wolfdieter Huy's Bf 109 G-2, 'White 1', W.Nr. 13633, while in transit to North Africa. Hptm. Huy was Staffelfkapitän of 7./JG 77 and, as the unit moved to North Africa directly from the Eastern Front, his aircraft is finished in one of the Geschwader's characteristic green schemes which appears darker than the black in the evidently faded Balkenkreuz. Note, however, that the earlier yellow Eastern Front fuselage band has been overpainted and replaced by a narrower white one. The wingtips, too, have been painted white and the emblem of III./JG 77 on the aircraft's nose carries the inscription 'Wander-Zirkus Ubben', a reference to the Kommandeur of III./JG 77, Hptm. Kurt Ubben.



SECRET

101/100
NO. 188883
AIR MINISTRY RECORDS
SECRET-NO. 3360/1942
6 NOV 1942

THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION HAS BEEN OBTAINED FROM A.I. (K) RECORDS. AS THE STATEMENTS MADE HAVE NOT AS YET BEEN VERIFIED, NO MENTION OF THEM SHOULD BE MADE IN INTELLIGENCE SUMMARIES OF COMBATS OR LOWER FORMATIONS, NOR SHOULD THEY BE ACCEPTED AS FACTS UNTIL COMMENTED ON IN AIR MINISTRY INTELLIGENCE SUMMARIES OR SPECIAL COMMUNICATIONS.

The following is a signal from H.Q. R.A.F. M.E. interpreted with the help of A.I. (K) Records.

M. E. Ref. A.39. 4/11. File 232.

PLACE, DATE AND TIME: South of Alamein, 29/10/42, 1320 hrs. B.S.T.

TYPE AND MARKS: Me. 109 1 + Staff Colour: White

UNIT: (7)/J.G.77. Crest: Wolf's Head.

DISC: 73012 (Unknown).

FELDPSTNUMMER: L. 31587 (Unknown).

START AND MISSION: Started from Zawyet Harun (Egypt) on a free lance patrol of four aircraft.

- This aircraft was shot down by a Spitfire, the pilot being taken prisoner.
- This pilot is a well-known fighter "Ace" and Staffelfkapitän, belonging to the Stab Schwarm of J.G. 77. He took part in the campaigns in Greece, Crete and the Balkans, and by July of last year he claimed to have sunk over 34,000 tons of enemy shipping and to have hit two cruisers and on one occasion a Flagship.
- He won the Ritterkreuz in July 1941 and the Münchner Neueste Nachrichten reported the fact that he had been awarded the Oak-leaves on 18/3/42.

Morale: High. Good security. Medium reliability.

Pilot: Hptm. Wolf Dieter HUY 2/8/17(5) P/W.

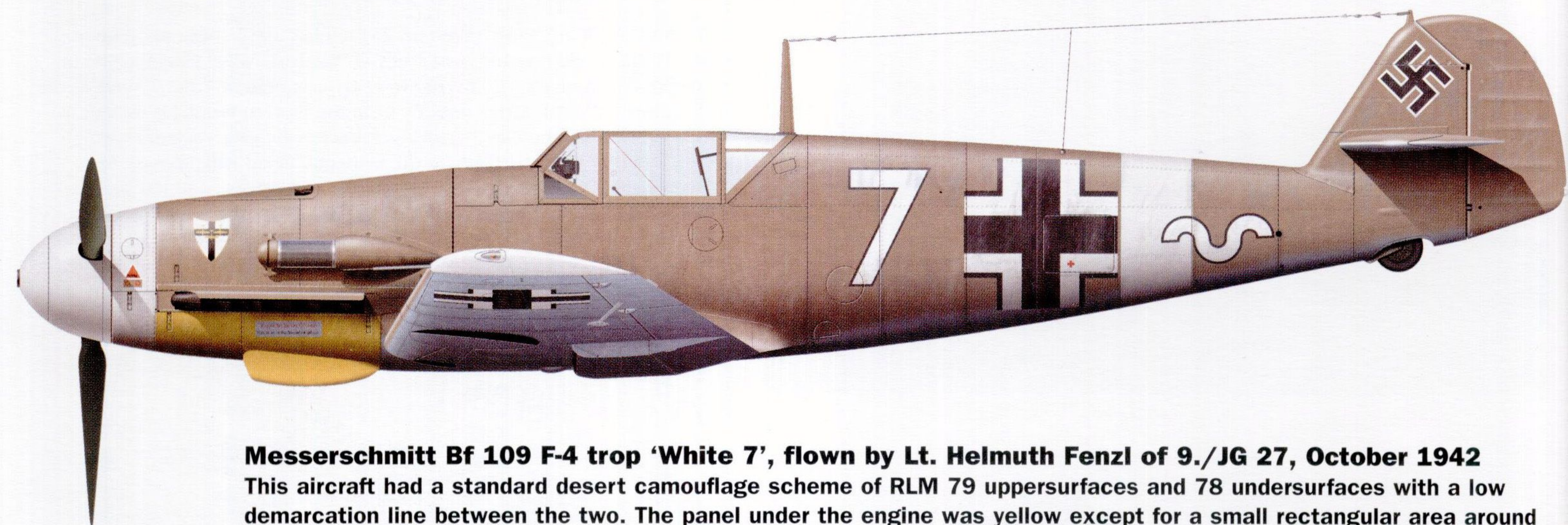
for S.D. Welkin. S/L
Wing Commander.

USUAL DISTRIBUTION

Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-2, 'White 1', W.Nr. 13633, flown by Hptm. Wolfdieter Huy, Staffelfkapitän of 7./JG 77, 25 October 1942

Hptm. Huy's aircraft is depicted here as it appeared shortly after leaving the Eastern Front but before commencing operations in the Mediterranean. In accordance with JG 77's aircraft in Russia, the grey factory finish on the uppersurfaces have been resprayed overall with Green 70 leaving the undersurfaces in RLM 76 and with areas of the original 74/75/76 scheme still visible around the Hakenkreuz and Werk Nummer on the tail. The forward part of the earlier wide yellow Russian Front theatre band aft of the fuselage Balkenkreuz has been overpainted and shows as a lighter green, and although a thinner white band has been added, it does not completely encircle the fuselage. A new white spinner and wingtips have already been added. The rudder decoration shows Huy's victories against aircraft and ships and also includes a representation of the Knight's Cross and Oak Leaves, the latter having been awarded on 13 March 1942. The wording 'Wander-Zirkus Ubben' – 'Ubben's Travelling Circus' – which appears around the Gruppe badge on the nose is a reference to the various locations to which Kurt Ubben's III./JG 77 has been assigned. Huy was flying this aircraft four days later when he destroyed a Spitfire as his 40th victory but was himself shot down and taken prisoner. A copy of the relevant ADI(k) report is shown above left.

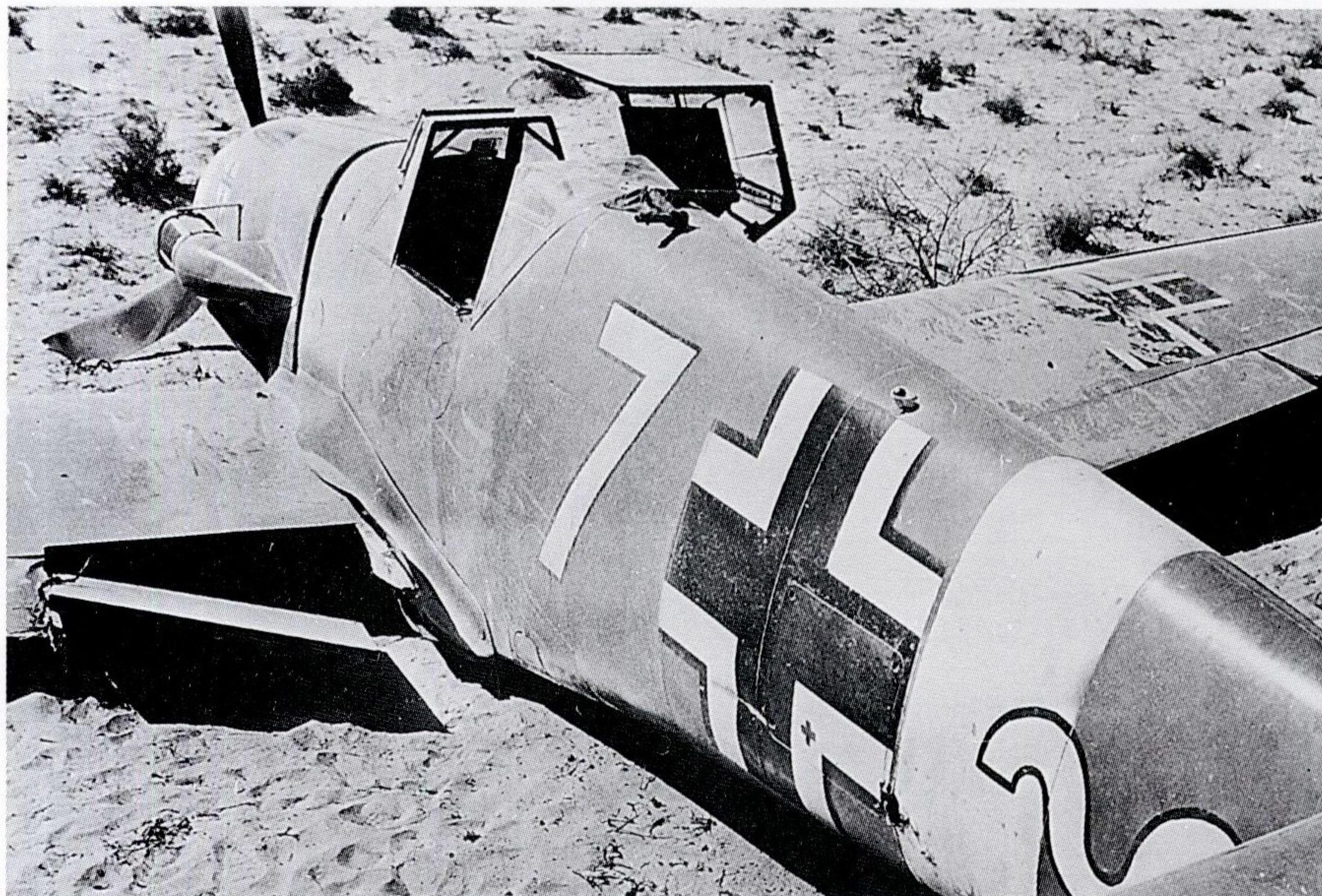
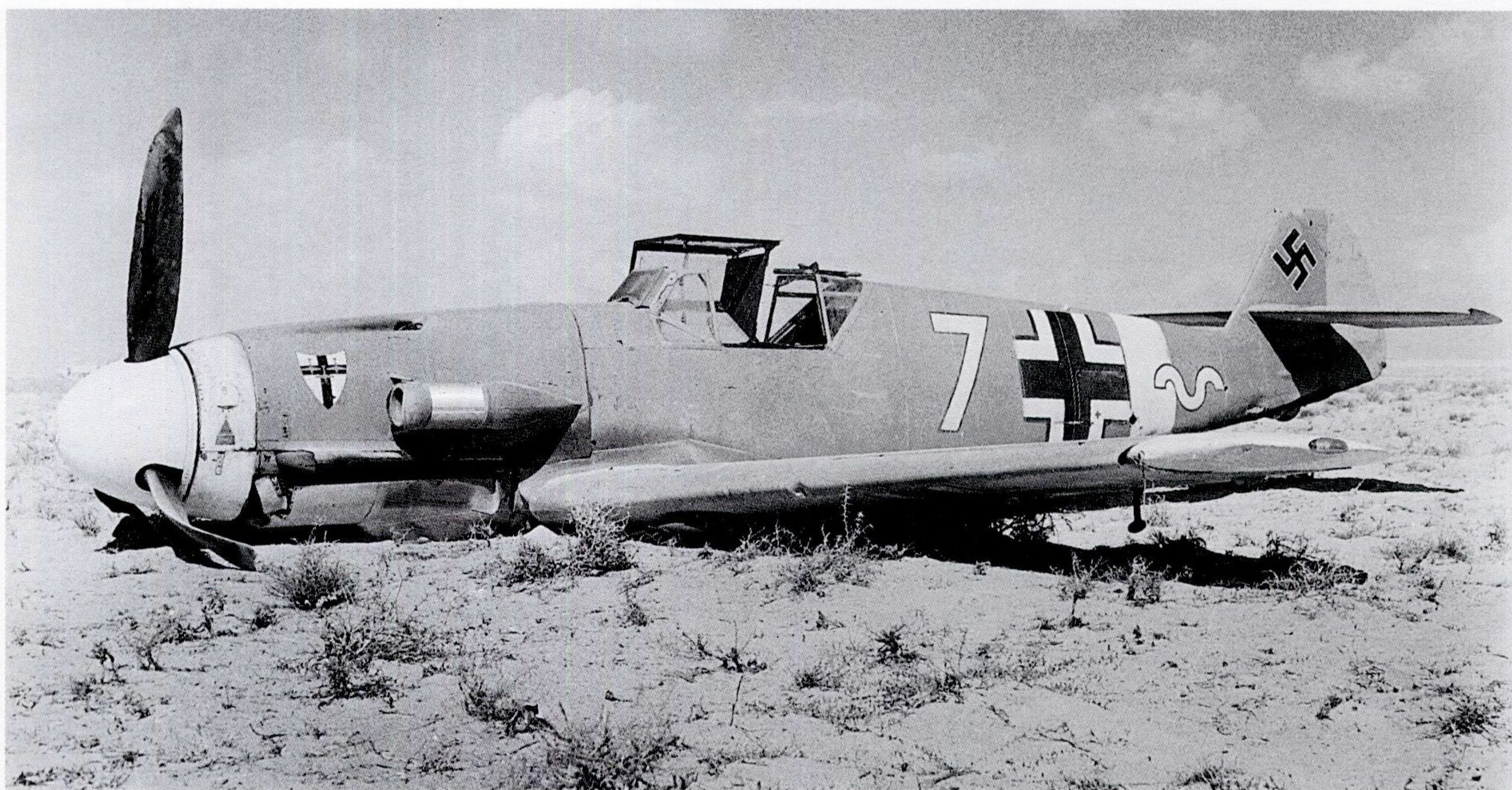




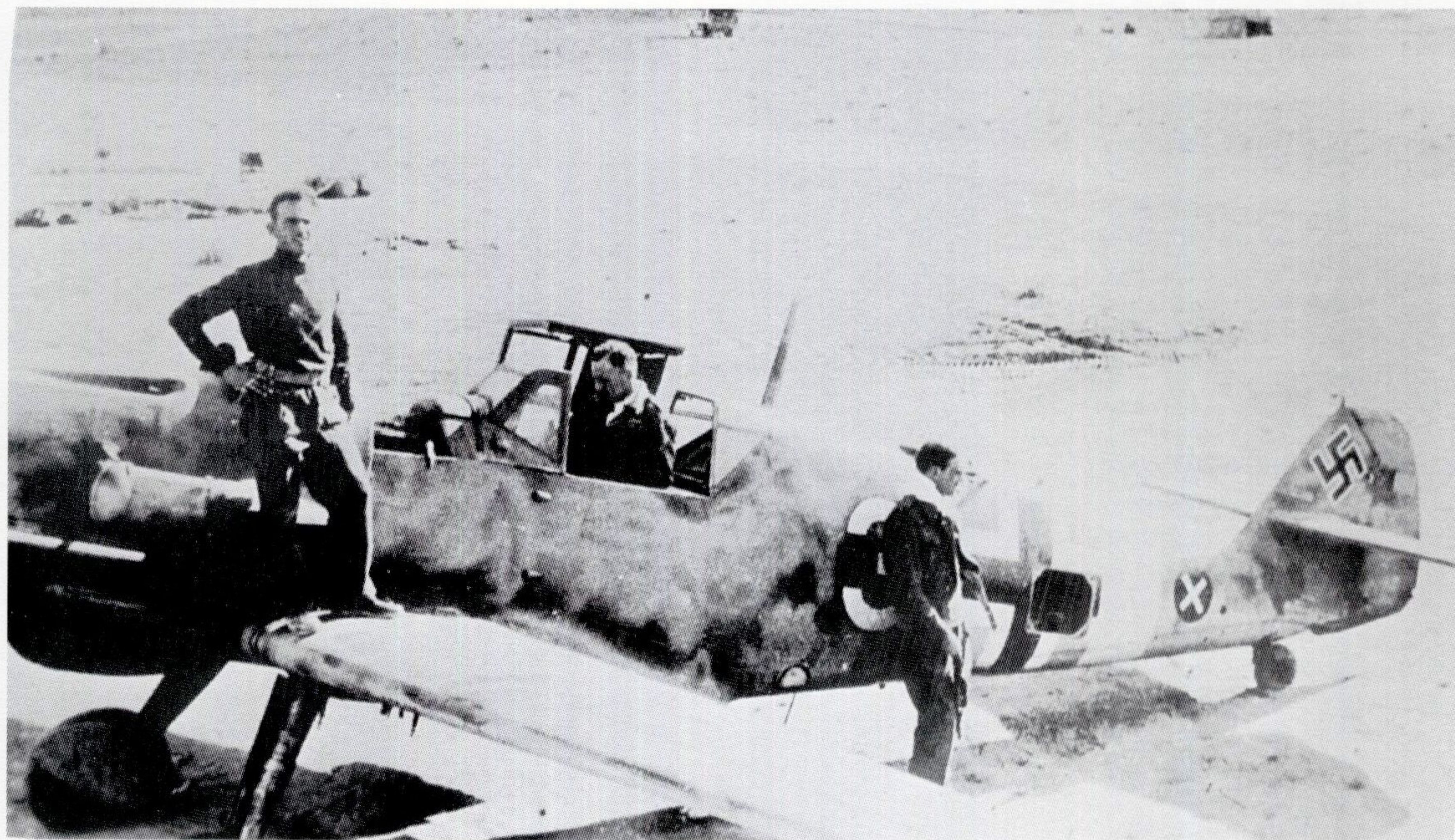
Messerschmitt Bf 109 F-4 trop 'White 7', flown by Lt. Helmuth Fenzl of 9./JG 27, October 1942

This aircraft had a standard desert camouflage scheme of RLM 79 uppersurfaces and 78 undersurfaces with a low demarcation line between the two. The panel under the engine was yellow except for a small rectangular area around the oil cooler stencilling but unusually, there was no octane marking on the fuselage. The entire spinner and front section of the engine cowling was white and, in addition to a white fuselage band, the upper and lower surfaces of the wingtips were also white. The emblem of III./JG 27 was applied to the cowling and the exterior of the sand filter on this aircraft was a bright natural metal. The fuselage numeral and III. Gruppe wavy bar were thinly edged in black.

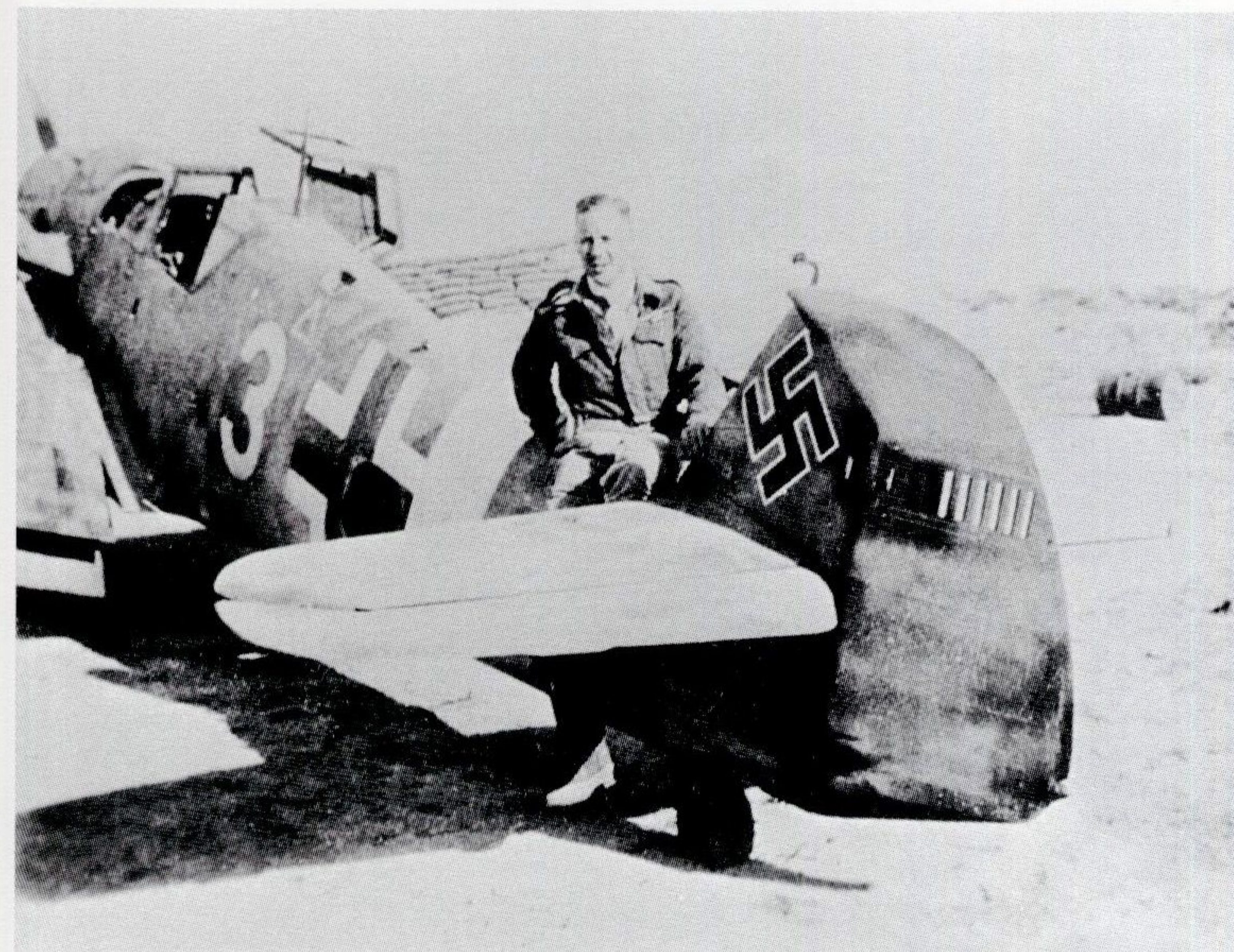
THIS PAGE: Early on the morning of 26 October, P-40s from 3 Sqn. RAAF and 450 Sqn. took off to attack concentrations of Axis forces which were preventing Eighth Army from achieving a breakthrough at Alamein. These P-40s were bounced by nine Bf 109s from III./JG 27 which were carrying out a freie Jagd, and in the ensuing aerial fight, the Bf 109 F-4 trop flown by Lt. Helmuth Fenzl of 9. Staffel was damaged and crash-landed. Lt. Fenzl was captured unhurt and became a PoW. These photographs, believed taken a few days later, show Fenzl's 'White 7', W.Nr. 13136.



RIGHT AND BELOW: This Bf 109 G-2, 'White 3' of 1./JG 77, was normally flown by Uffz. Horst Schlick but was abandoned near the airfield at Bir-el-Abd on 4 November 1942 and is shown here being examined by personnel of 250 Sqn. who found the aircraft virtually intact. The earlier dark green camouflage colour was retained but the upper surfaces have received a sand overspray to make the aircraft less conspicuous in the Mediterranean theatre. Note that when this sand overspray was applied, the aircraft carried two black victory bars on the rudder to indicate Uffz. Schlick's victories in Russia. Subsequently, five white bars were added over the sand colour to show Schlick's victories while operating over Malta between July and October 1942, and a sixth white bar represents a P-40 shot down on 1 November.



BELOW: The symbol behind the fuselage Balkenkreuz, shown again in this photograph of another of the Staffel's aircraft, was first applied to the Bf 109 Es of 1./LG 2 as a reminder of the pilots' service during the Spanish Civil War and was retained when this Staffel was redesignated 1./JG 77.

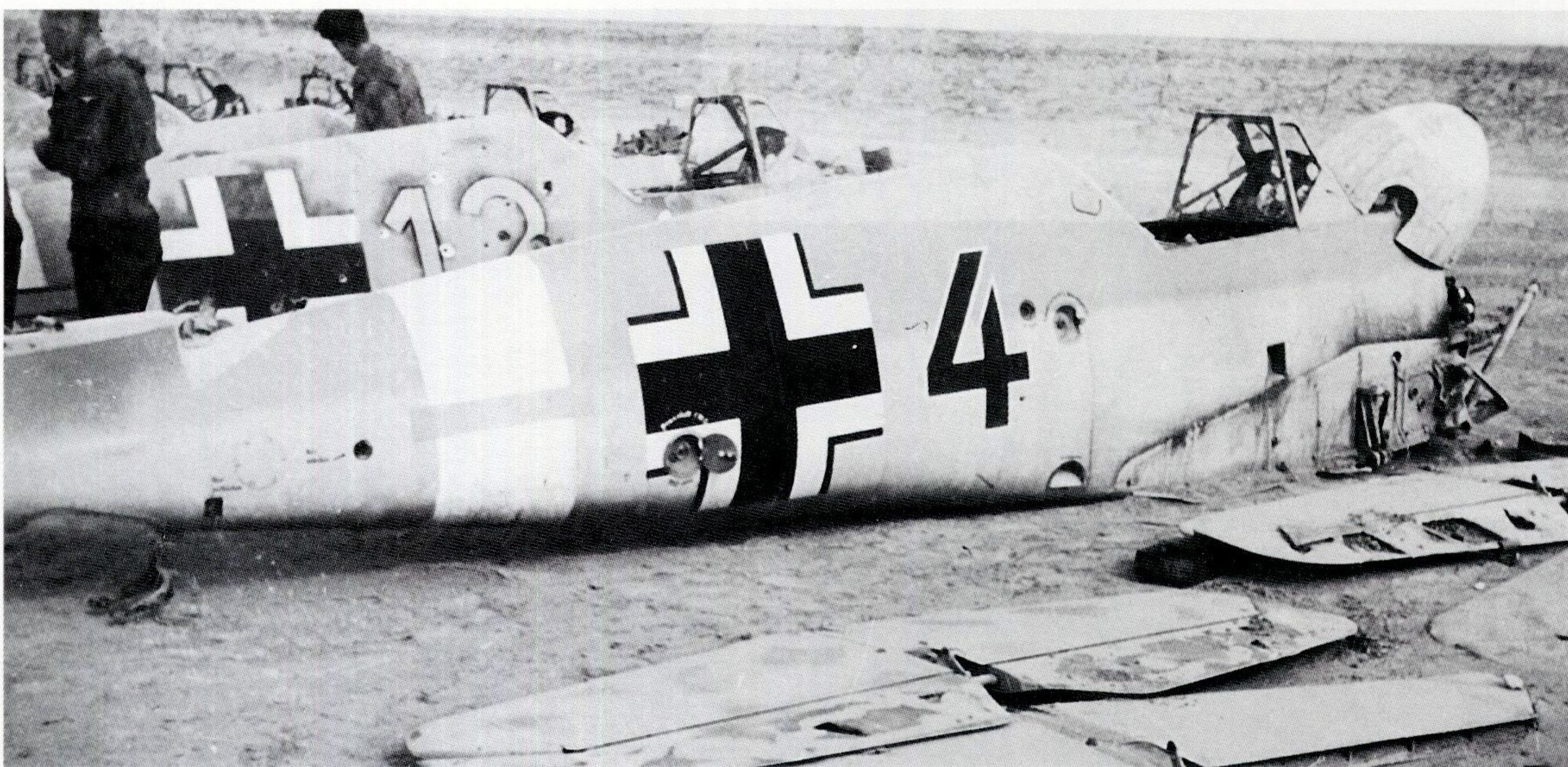


Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-2 'White 3' flown by Uffz. Horst Schlick of 1./JG 77, October 1942

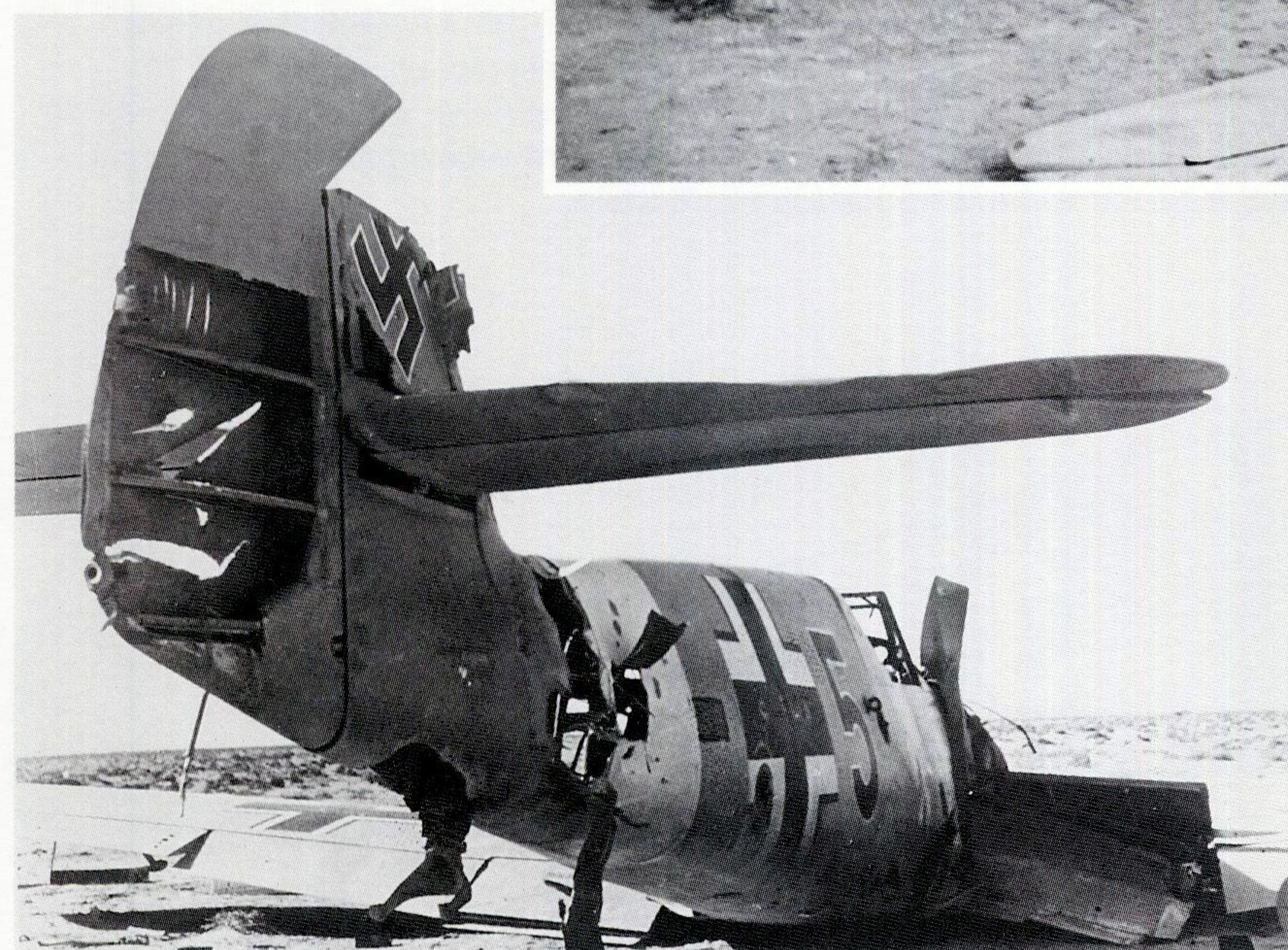
The original camouflage on this aircraft, W.Nr. 10533, was modified with a dense overspray of Sandgelb 79. Although not clear in the accompanying photographs, it is believed that the original finish was the dark green 70 used by JG 77 when in Russia. It is also believed that this aircraft had the standard yellow panel under the nose as well as white theatre markings which included white wingtips top and bottom.



RIGHT: This photograph of an aircraft graveyard is believed to have been taken at Gambut in November 1942 and shows a number of Bf 109s with various camouflage finishes. It is thought that the second aircraft, 'Yellow 12', is the Bf 109 F-4 trop, W.Nr. 10019, which was shot down during an air battle near El Adem on 13 April 1942, the pilot, Uffz. Josef Fritz of 6./JG 3 being taken prisoner. If this is correct, then it suggests this site was a British dump for captured German aircraft which remained virtually intact during the June 1942 German advance towards El Alamein and was still there when Gambut was recaptured in November 1942. In any event, 'Yellow 12' has received a light overspray of sand yellow which has left areas of the darker 74/75 finish showing through. Note the badge of II./JG 3 just forward of the windscreen. On the third fuselage in the line-up, the Balkenkreuz appears to have been oversprayed and the fourth aircraft has again received a light overspray of sand yellow but in an entirely different from that on 'Yellow 12'. Despite the swastika on the tail of the next machine, it seems that the original German fuselage markings have been painted out and an RAF roundel applied.



ABOVE: Another view of 'Black 4' also seen in the foreground (*TOP*). This was a Bf 109 F-4 trop which had previously belonged to 5./JG 27 and was finished in a mid-demarcation 78/79 scheme. The Gruppe bar superimposed over the white fuselage band was red, outlined in black, and, unusually, the spinner perched forward of the windscreen appears to be Sandgelb RLM 79 with a white tip.

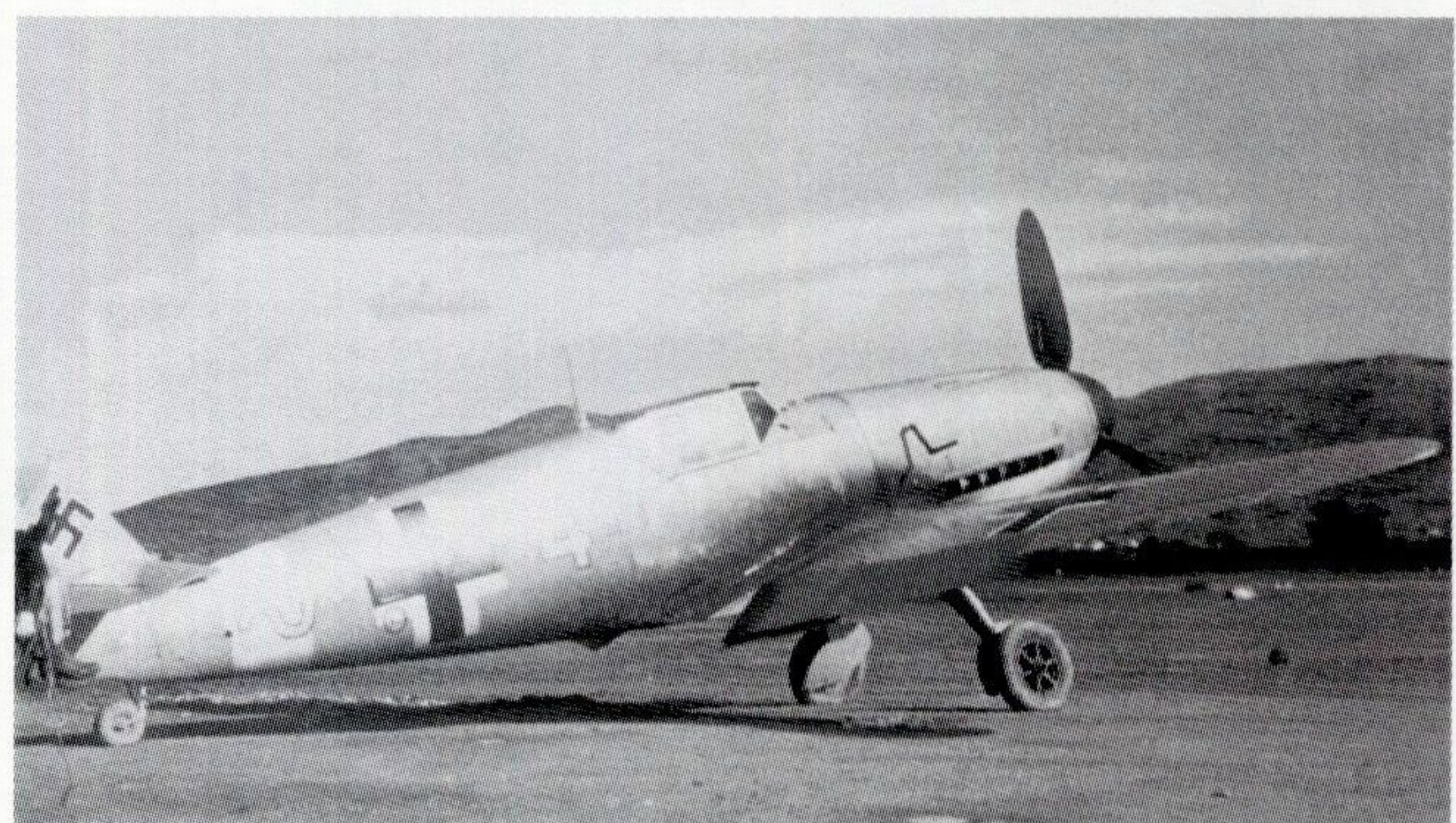


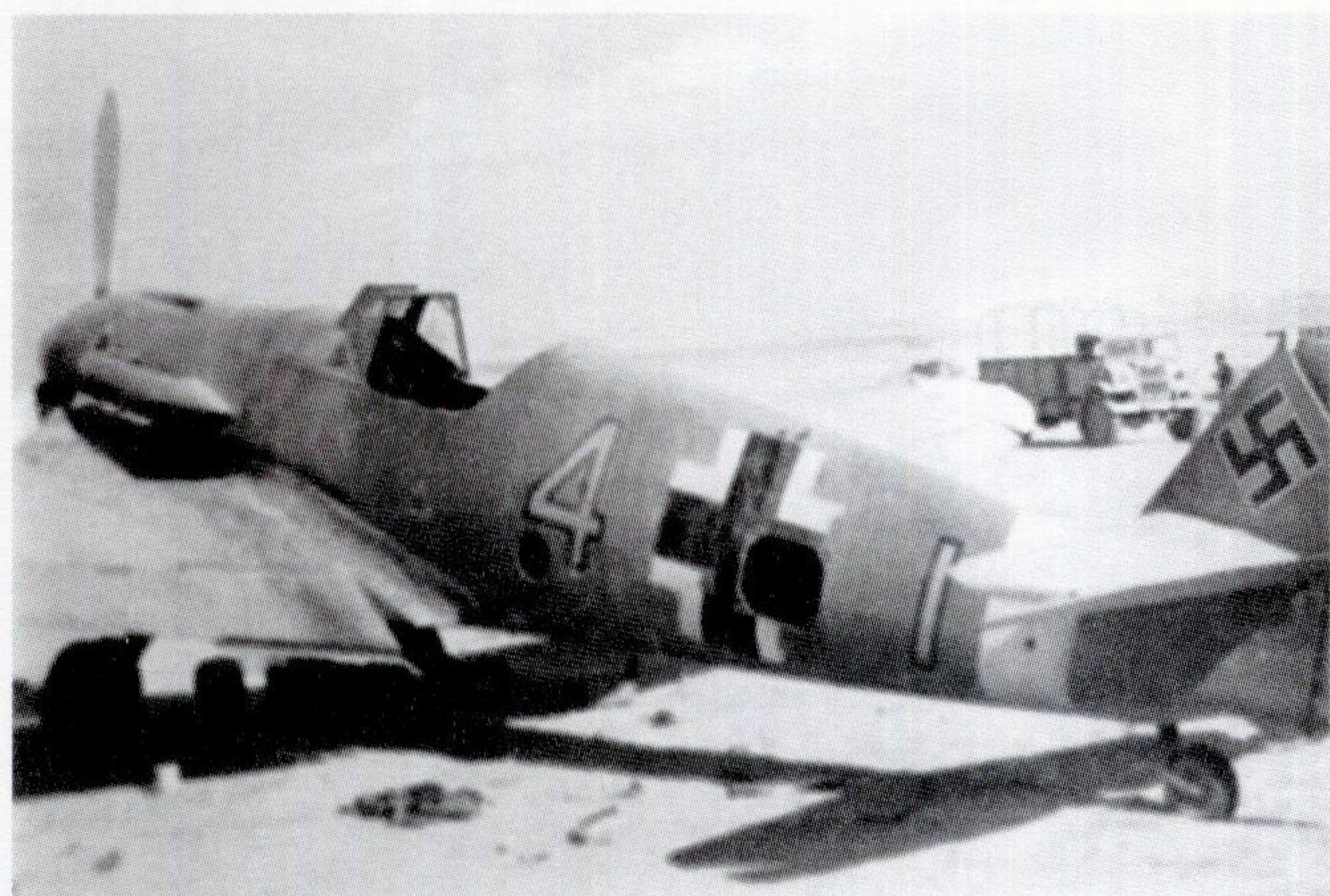
LEFT: Note again the black numeral and the partially overpainted red Gruppe bar on this crash-landed Bf 109 F also of 5./JG 27. Some of the rudder fabric, on which was obviously displayed a record of the pilot's victories, has been stripped as a souvenir.



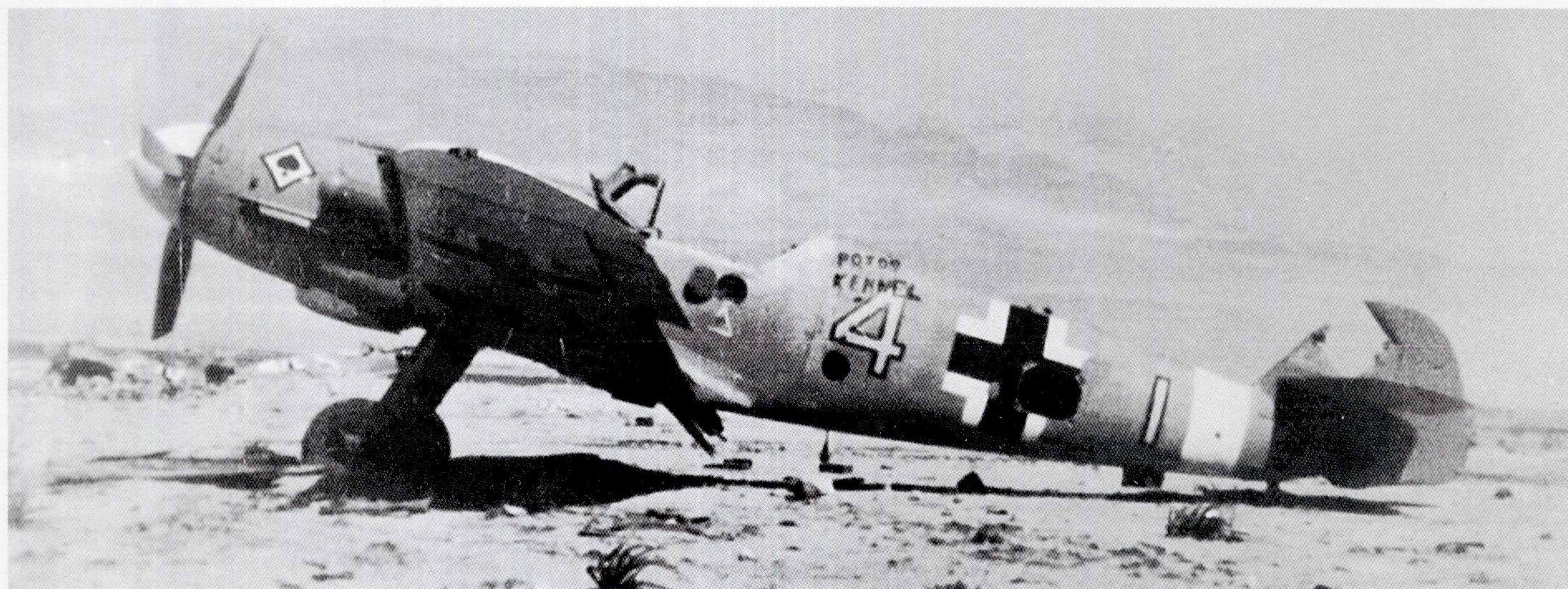
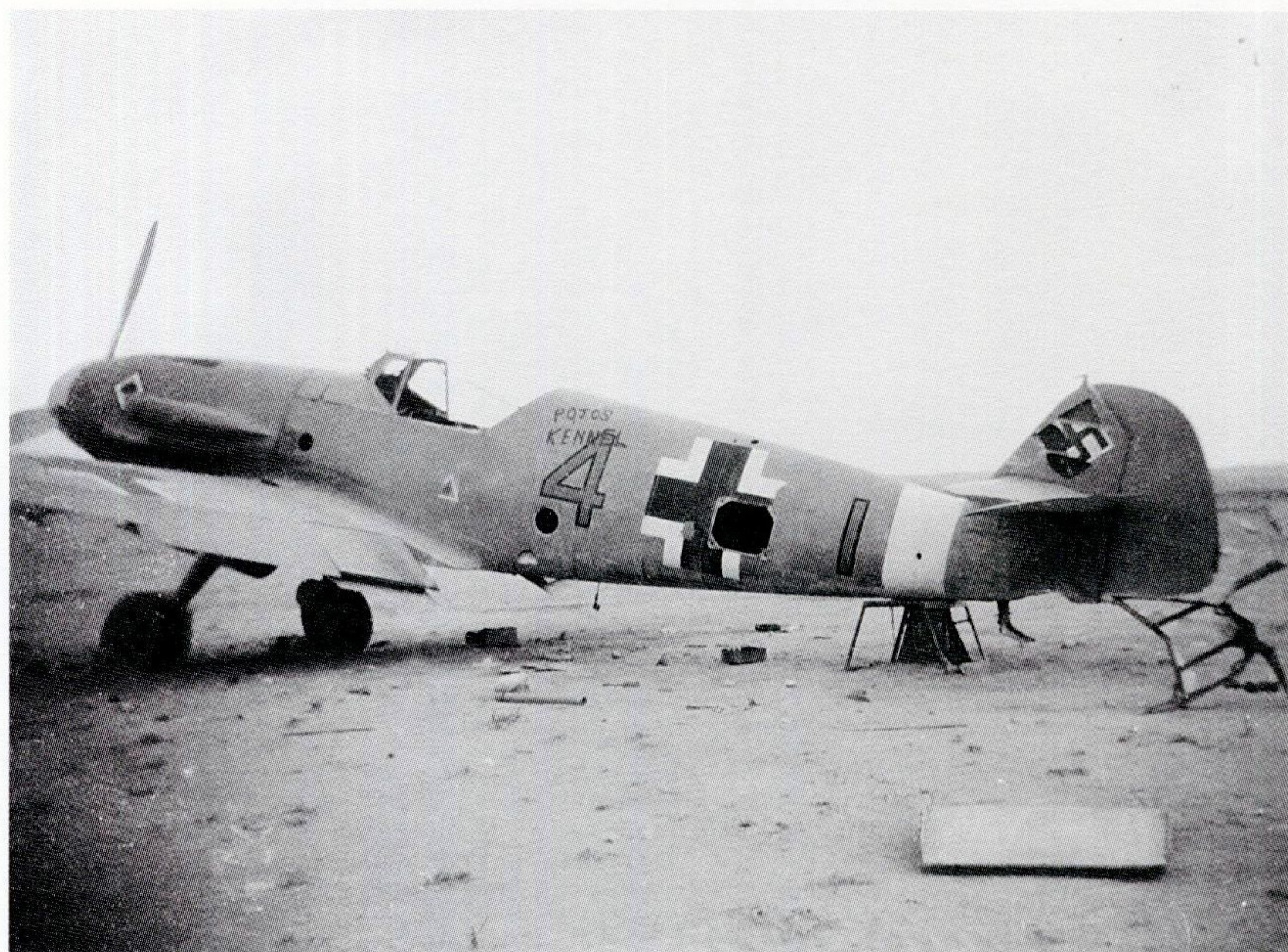
ABOVE AND LEFT: Clearly retaining a European 74/75/76 scheme, this Bf 109 F coded 'Yellow 9' was found at Daba in November 1942 but the unit to which it belonged has not yet been identified. The uppersurfaces of the He 111 were overall Sandgelb RLM 79 and the palm tree and mosque emblem of Stab/St.G 3 appeared on both sides of the nose.

BELOW: 'Yellow 4' of 9./JG 27 was finished in a low-demarcation scheme of 78 and 79. The panel under the nose was yellow and, as with the number on the fuselage side, the yellow wavy line of III. Gruppe, positioned over the white fuselage band, was outlined in black.



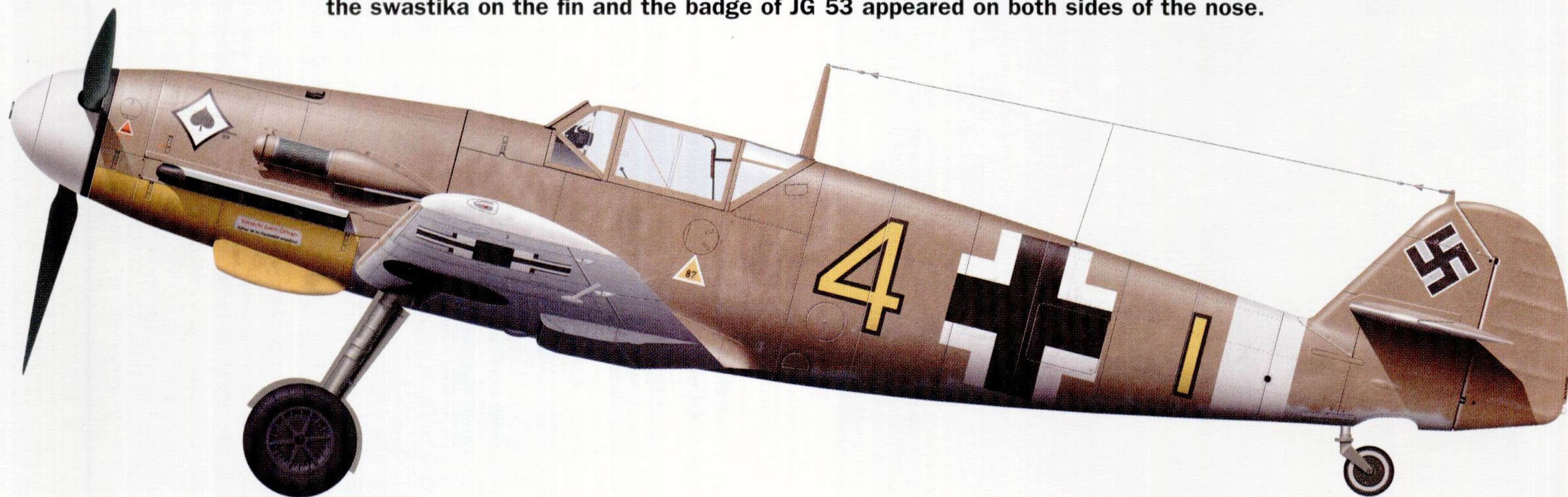


THIS PAGE: Very similar camouflage and markings have been applied to this Bf 109 F-4 trop of 9./JG 53 which was found and photographed by advancing Allied troops, probably on the airfield at Quotaiiya where a number of JG 53's aircraft were damaged by Allied bombing. Note that the black arms of the fuselage cross are wider than normal and, again, that the cross lacks an outer black outline.



Messerschmitt Bf 109 F-4 trop 'Yellow 4' of 9./JG 53, Quotaiiya, October 1942

The uppersurface camouflage finish on 'Yellow 4' was an overall application of RLM 79 Sandgelb with an uneven demarcation line along the lower fuselage suggesting that the 79 has been simply brushed over an earlier finish. This earlier scheme is believed to have been 74, 75 and 76 and it is possible that the undersurfaces, rather than being RLM 78 Hellblau, remained 76 and have been shown accordingly in the profile. Full theatre markings were applied and comprised a completely white spinner, white wingtips top and bottom and a white band around the rear fuselage. The Grey 76 of the original scheme may be seen around the swastika on the fin and the badge of JG 53 appeared on both sides of the nose.



RIGHT: Even when unit emblems are not visible, it is sometimes possible to identify a particular Staffel by the style or the size of the numbers used to identify its aircraft but, unfortunately, the style of numeral on this 'White 9', a Bf 109 F trop, has not been seen elsewhere. The vertical bar aft of the fuselage indicates III. Gruppe but the parent Geschwader is unknown. All that can be said is that, by a process of elimination, this machine probably did not belong to III./JG 27 as, for most of 1942 and 1943, that Geschwader seems to have favoured the wavy Gruppe bar and III./JG 77 rarely used a Gruppe symbol. The machine may, therefore, have belonged to III./JG 53. Note the fuselage cross lacks an outer black outline.



ABOVE AND RIGHT: Another example of a brushed finish may be seen on this as yet unidentified Bf 109 G fuselage, although in this case the size and style of numeral used suggests JG 77. Certainly this aircraft has been transferred from another theatre as the fresh white band around the rear fuselage contrasts strongly with the discoloured white areas of the Balkenkreuz, evidence of some considerable previous use before the fresh white band was applied. The original camouflage finish may be seen in the area surrounding the swastika and the aircraft's identity has obviously been recently changed.



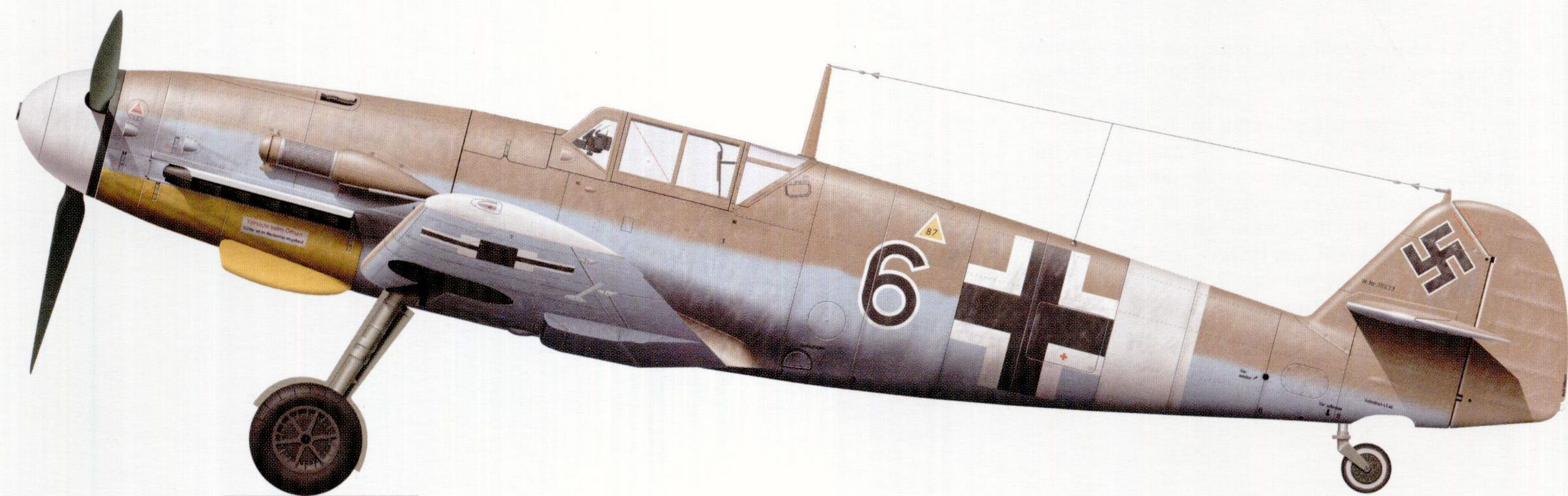


BELOW: 'Black 6' having its swastika painted out before being replaced by RAAF markings.

ABOVE AND BELOW: 'Black 6' of 8./JG 77 was damaged on 4 November 1942 and made an emergency landing at Bir-el-Arca with the pilot, Lt. Heinz Lüdemann, slightly wounded. Later moved to Gambut for repairs, the aircraft was abandoned when the airfield personnel withdrew and was captured there on 16 November by members of 3 Sqn. RAAF who repainted it and applied the squadron code CV-V.



Bf 109 G-2 trop 'Black 6', flown by Lt. Heinz Lüdemann of 8./JG 77, November 1942
This aircraft, W.Nr. 10639, was finished in a standard 78/79 scheme with the spinner, fuselage band and wingtips in white. The black numeral on the fuselage was edged in white and the underside of the nose was painted yellow.



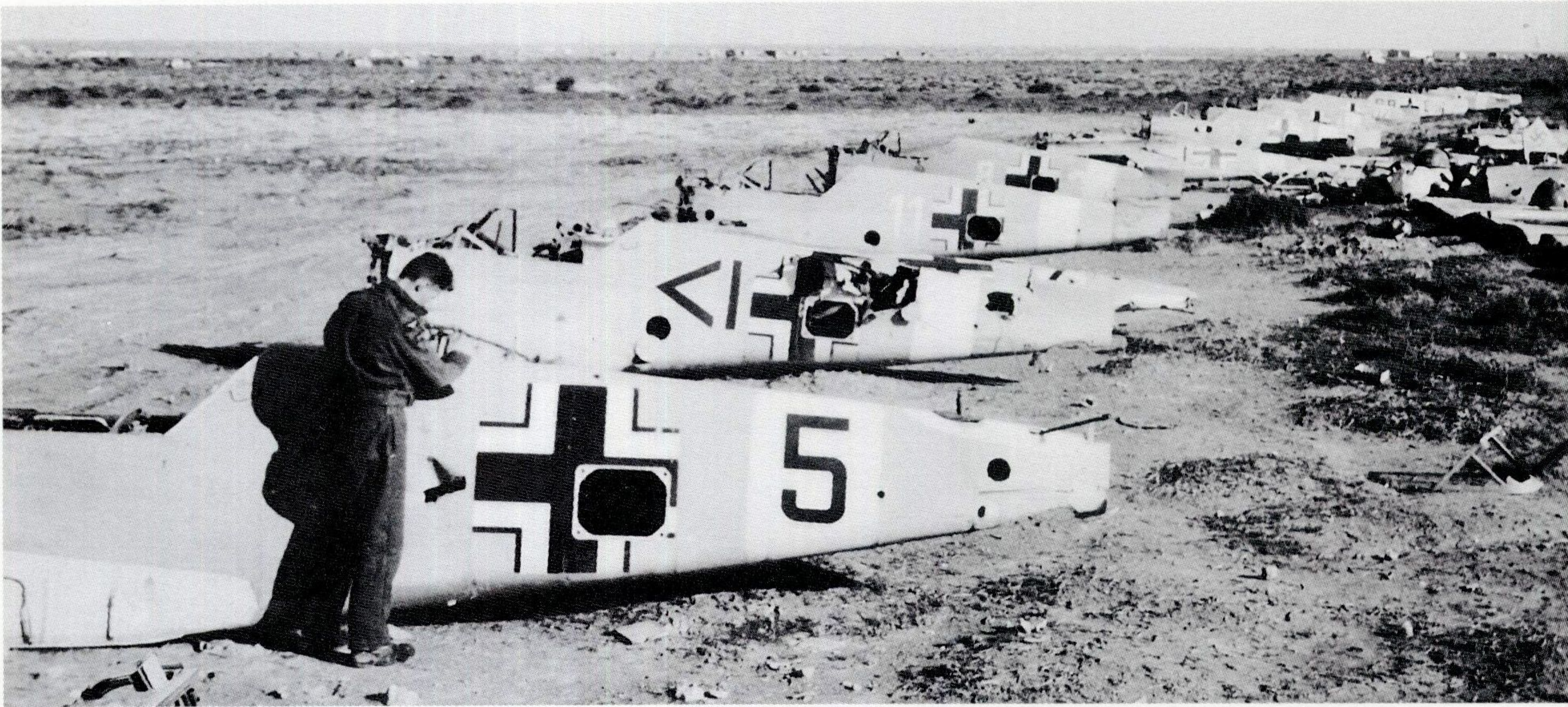


ABOVE: The same machine taking off, now repaired and with newly-painted roundels and the code letters of 3 Sqn. RAAF. This aircraft was retained in the Middle East where it was employed in a number of comparative test flights until shipped to the UK, arriving at RAF Collyweston on 26 December 1943. Allocated the RAF serial RN228, it again took part in various comparative trials and, unlike many other German aircraft brought to the UK, this aircraft survived the immediate post-war period and was placed in storage. Despite various attempts to restore 'Black 6' to flying condition, it was not until 17 March 1991 that this was finally achieved. The intention then was that the aircraft should be flown at flying displays for a limited period and then placed on static display, but during its last public performance on 12 October 1997, the pilot experienced a suspected mechanical problem and elected to make a forced landing, during which the aircraft overshot the landing area and came to rest inverted in a ploughed field. It was subsequently restored, but not to flying condition, and is now on static display in the UK.

RIGHT: Although no trace of this aircraft has yet been found in RAF records, another Bf 109 G-2 trop was salvaged in North Africa at the end of 1942 and was shipped to the UK. This aircraft belonged to 1./JG 77 and is believed to have been W.Nr. 10558. A reliable secondary source states that parts of this aircraft were used as spares to keep 'Black 6', W.Nr. 10636, in the air. Seen inspecting the aircraft in this photograph are F/Lt. Lewendon, (right) Commanding Officer of the RAF's No. 1426 (Enemy Aircraft) Flight and F/O Gough of the same unit. No. 1426 Flight was formed in 1941 to demonstrate ex-Luftwaffe aircraft and familiarise RAF, USAAF and anti-aircraft personnel with their recognition features and performance.



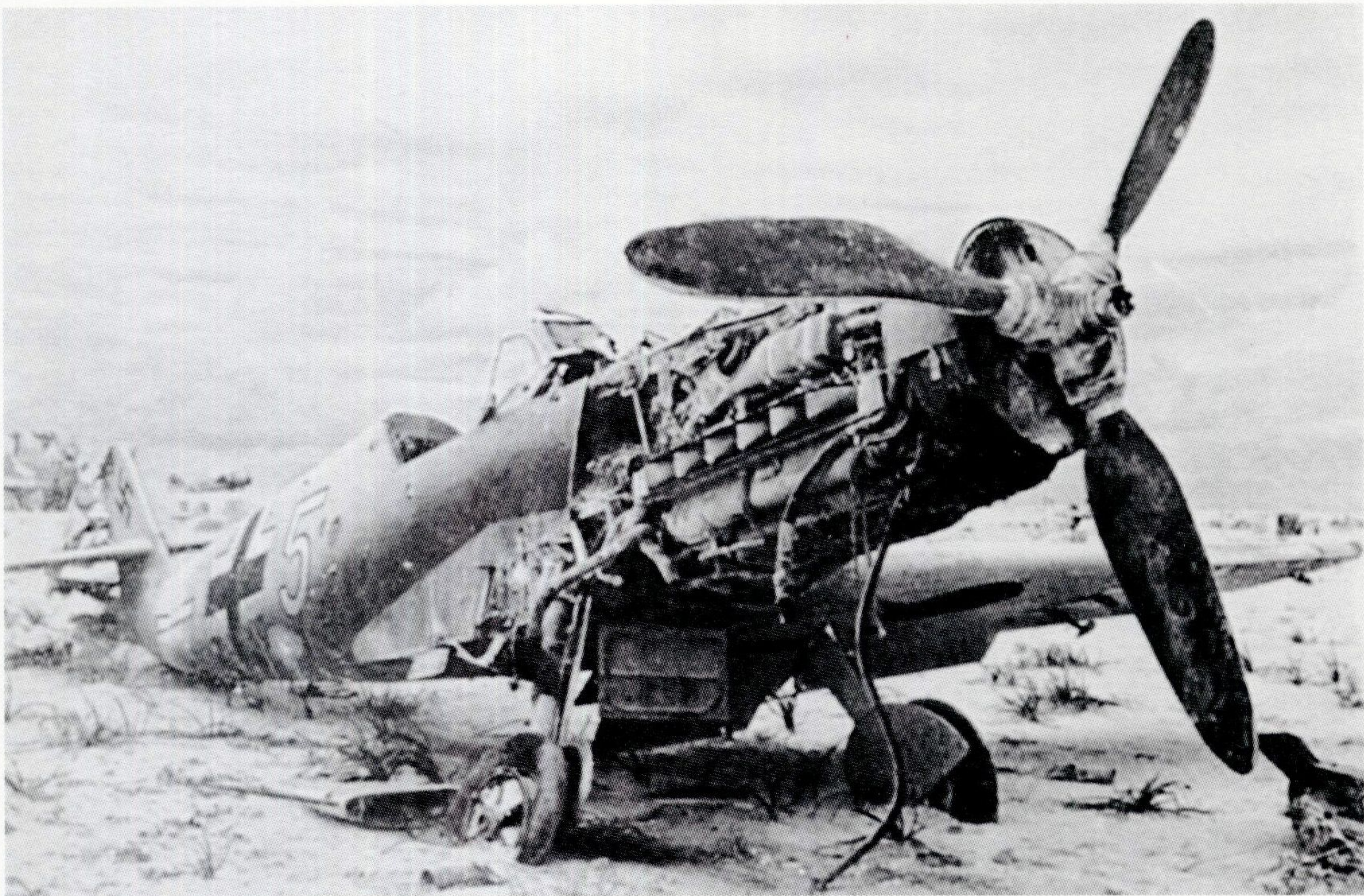
LEFT: Other than it was flown by 185 Sqn., no details are available concerning this captured Bf 109 G coded GL-?.



ABOVE: A line-up of Bf 109 F fuselages, probably at Gambut or Derna, all finished in RLM 78 and 79 camouflage colours with white fuselage bands. The position of the identification number on the fuselage of 'Black 5' in the foreground is believed to indicate that this aircraft belonged to a reconnaissance unit.



LEFT: This oil-spattered Bf 109 F-4 trop of 6./JG 27 made a forced landing near Daba and is being examined by an Allied NCO. The 'Berlin Bear' emblem of II./JG 27 was painted on the engine cowling and, barely visible in this photograph, is the fuselage code 'Yellow 8'.

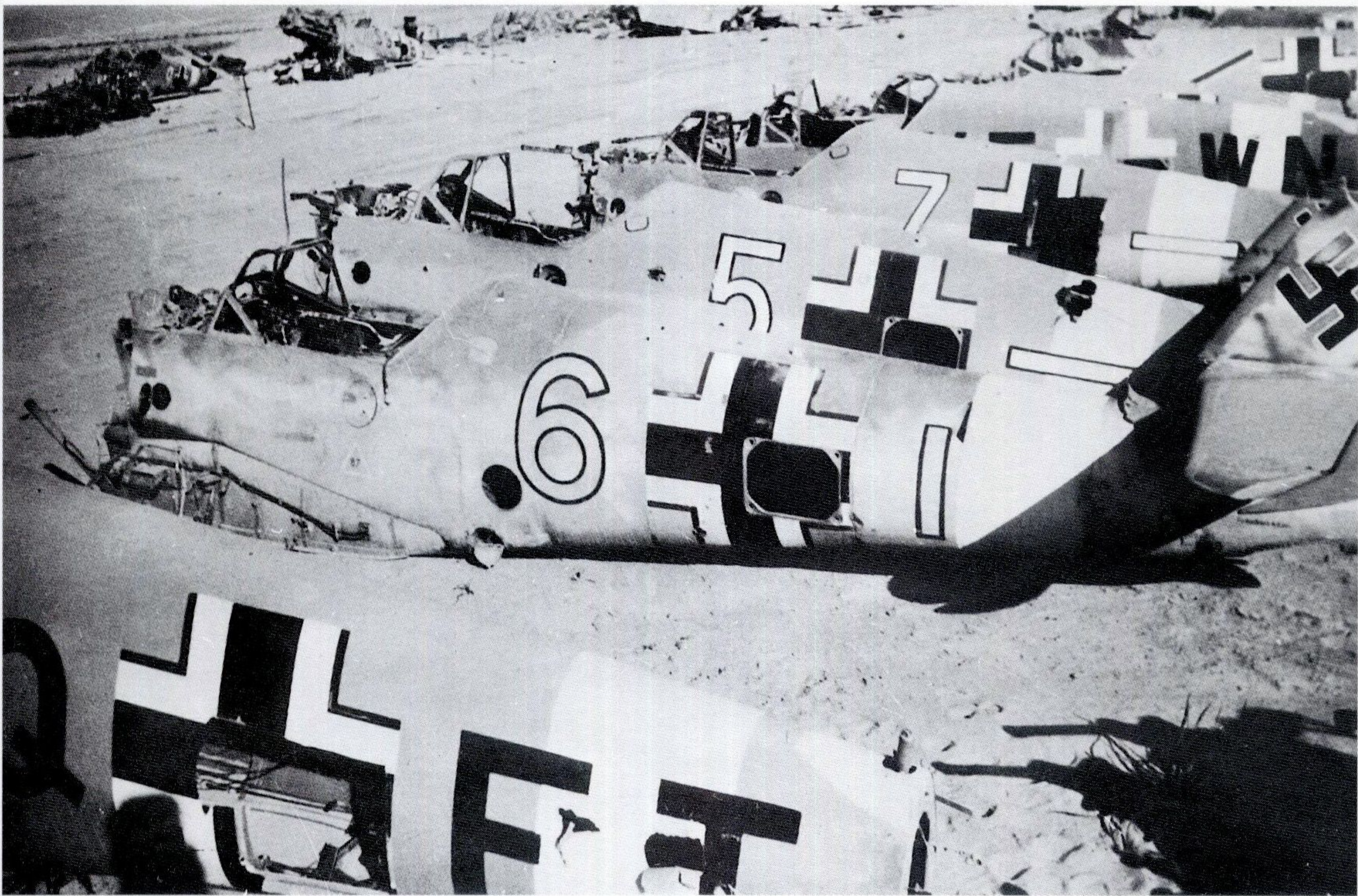


RIGHT: This Bf 109 F-4/Z trop coded 'White 5', belonged to 4./JG 27.

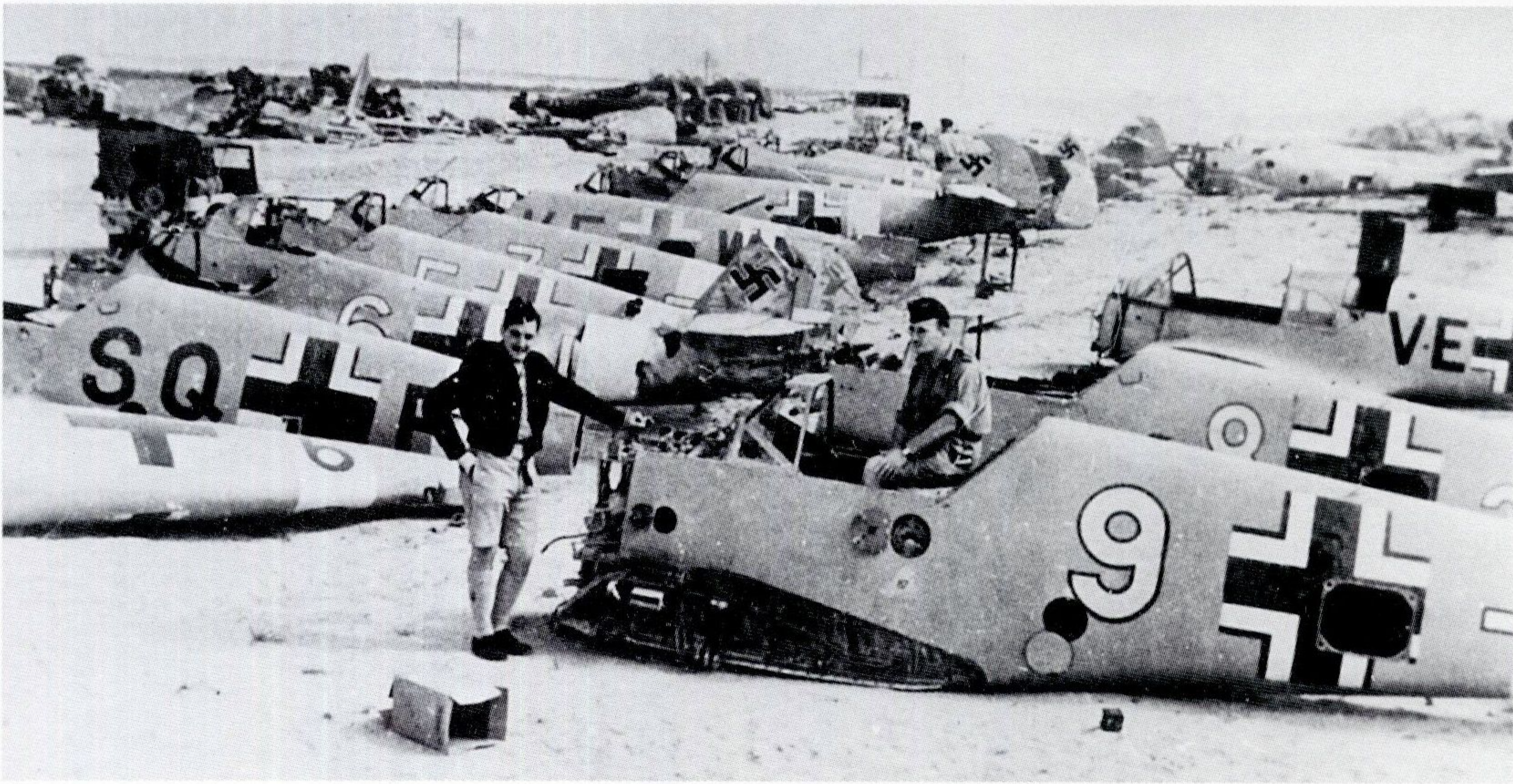


THIS PAGE: Daba was one of the Luftwaffe's airfields closest to the front line at El Alamein and, when captured at the end of 1942, over 50 aircraft were found there, mostly machines which had been damaged by the bombing which preceded Eighth Army's breakthrough. These photographs show the shattered remains of just a few of these aircraft. Note that the Fi 156 has the badge of III./JG 27 on the nose and that in the photograph above, the Bf 109 F furthest from the camera had the 'Berlin Bear' emblem of II./JG 27 on the engine cowling and was coded 'White 6'. Also visible in the photograph above, just beyond the Fi 156, is a loose engine cowling carrying the 'Pik As' badge of JG 53.





THIS PAGE: Some 40 further Bf 109 F fuselages were found abandoned at Daba. Most of these aircraft once belonged to JG 27 but two other aircraft are still marked with their factory or delivery codes, suggesting that these may not even have reached a service unit before being written off. Note also that the wingless fuselage at top left in the photographs top and bottom carries the S9 code of III./ZG 1.



Operation 'Torch'

Egypt was now lost to the Axis. With an understrength *Panzerarmee Afrika*, *Feldmarschall* Rommel knew that his only chance, as so many times before in the desert campaign, was to retreat westwards, thus shortening his lines of supply, lengthening those of the victorious Eighth Army and perhaps allowing his German and Italian forces to recuperate from the losses of the past few weeks. But, on 8 November 1942, four days after Montgomery's decisive victory at El Alamein, a co-ordinated attack was launched by American and British forces which landed behind Rommel in French North Africa. The intention was that while Eighth Army continued to push German forces westwards, the forces landed during 'Torch' would make a rapid thrust eastwards to join up with Eighth Army. But the Germans reacted to the invasion with surprising speed and on 9 November Kesselring began sending troops from Sicily to hold Tunisia. This rapid reaction, together with the strength and battle experience of the German troops, foiled any Allied plan for a rapid thrust and instead the campaign became long and difficult.

The position of the *Luftwaffe* fighter units in mid-November 1942 may be summarised as follows:

- I./JG 27:** This *Gruppe* was no longer in Africa. Lacking aircraft and with its flying personnel exhausted, it was being rested before going to Normandy, in France, to re-equip and reorganise.

- II./JG 27:** On 14 November, this *Gruppe*, under the command of *Hptm.* Gustav Rödel, left Berca and moved to Arco Philaenorum for a few days before moving again to Magrun and Merduma (where it remained until 6 December). At that time, the unit had around 20 aircraft which included 12 Bf 109 F-4s and eight G-2s.

- III./JG 27:** Commanded by *Hptm.* Ernst Düllberg, III./JG 27 left Tobruk on 4 November and moved to Benghazi. On 12 November, its 20 Bf 109 F-4s left Africa and transferred to Kastelli on the island of Crete, also the base of some Bf 110s of III./ZG 26. On Crete, III./JG 27 was ordered to protect Southern Greece, the Aegean Sea and, indirectly, the vital oilfields in Rumania against possible attacks by Allied long-range bombers.

- I./JG 53:** This *Gruppe*, under the command of *Major* Friedrich-Karl Müller, was re-equipping with Bf 109 G-2s in Sicily but would soon return to operations.

- II./JG 53:** *Major* Gerhard Michalski's *Gruppe* of Bf 109 G-4s was sent to Elmas, in Sardinia, on 6 November, and escorted *Luftwaffe* bombers attacking the landing forces in French North Africa. The *Gruppe* later transferred to Tunisia.

- III./JG 53:** Recently re-equipped with Bf 109 G-4s and commanded by *Major* Franz Götz, this *Gruppe* fought alongside II./JG 53.

- I./JG 77 and III./JG 77:** I./JG 77 was commanded by *Hptm.* Heinz Bär and III./JG 77 by *Hptm.* Kurt Ubben. Both *Gruppen* were equipped with Bf 109 G-2s and provided the main aerial defence force in Libya and, later, Tunisia.

To reinforce these *Gruppen*, the following fighter units were rapidly transferred to the theatre:

- 11./JG 2:** *Obt.* Julius Meimberg's *Höhenstaffel*, or high-altitude *Staffel*, was operating from Poix in France at the beginning of November with nine Bf 109 G-1s and their pilots. Ordered to Tunisia, the unit transferred via Mannheim, where one of its aircraft was damaged on 4 November, and on the 16th the *Staffel* landed at Bizerta where it operated under the control of JG 53.

- II./JG 51:** For *Hptm.* Hartmann Grasser's *Gruppe*, then re-equipping and converting to the Fw 190 at Jesau, the order to move to the South came as a surprise. However, on receipt of their orders, 4./JG 51 under *Obt.* Georg Seelmann, and 5./JG 51 led by *Lt.* Ralph Furch, stopped their conversion and reverted to the Bf 109 G-2. On

8 November, 20 pilots of the *Gruppe* left Wiener-Neustadt intending to fly to Tunisia, but in Sicily a Ju 52 transporting its ground personnel crashed into a mountain and some men were killed. Later, at the end of November, the *Gruppe* was brought up to full strength with the transfer from Northern Germany of *Oblt.* Hans Heidrich's 3./JG 1 which was soon redesignated 6./JG 51.

11./JG 26: This *Staffel*, another *Höhenstaffel* equipped with Bf 109 G-1s and commanded by *Oblt.* Hans-Jürgen Westphall, was the third *Staffel* diverted to the Mediterranean from the Western Front. It arrived in Tunisia on or about 15 November, but many ground personnel were lost in transit when their Ju 52s were shot down, probably by RAF Beaufighters. In Tunisia, 11./JG 26 operated under the orders of II./JG 51.

II./JG 2: Shortly after Operation 'Torch', the *Wehrmacht* invaded Southern France and was supported by JG 2, I. *Gruppe* moving to Marseille, III./JG 2 to Bourges and 10./JG 2 to Istres. II./JG 2, under the command of *Oblt.* Adolf Dickfeld, was held in readiness at Beaumont-le-Roger but on 17 November it was ordered to transfer to San Pietro in Sicily as added protection for the supply route to Africa. The Fw 190 As of the *Gruppe* then flew south, arriving on Sicily on 22 November.

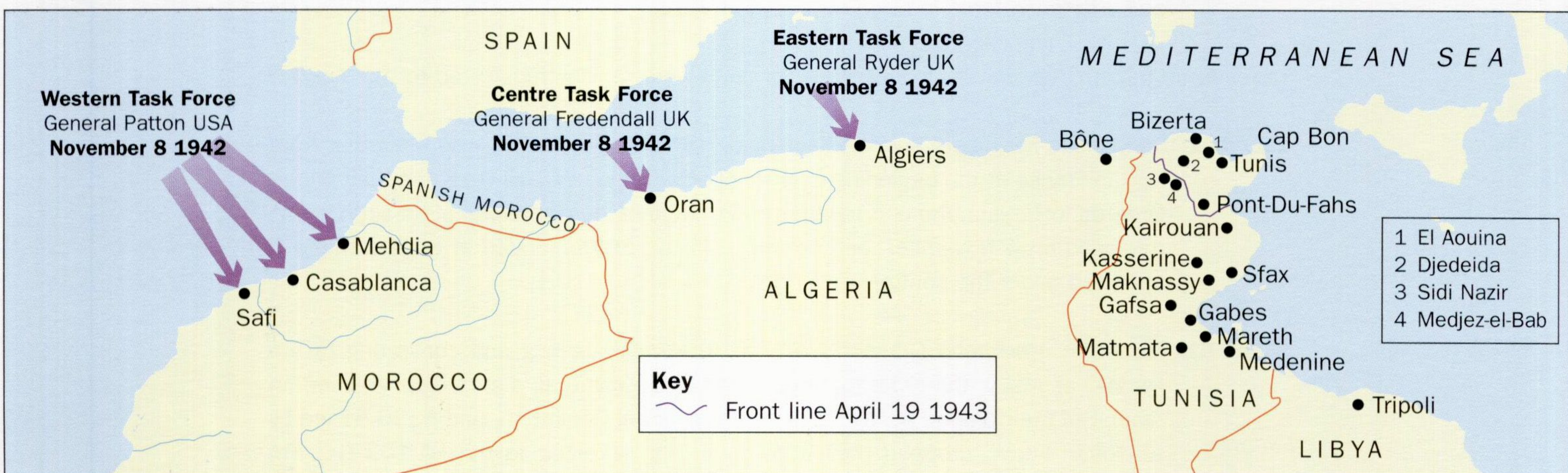
It will be noted from the above that the German fighter forces in the Mediterranean were divided into two parts, one operating in support of the German and Italian forces retreating through Libya and the other fighting against the Anglo-American troops which had landed in French North Africa. Another unit transferred to the Tobruk area was the ground-attack unit III./*Zerstörergeschwader* 1 equipped with Bf 109 E fighter-bombers. Later redesignated I./*Schlachtgeschwader* 2, this *Gruppe* supported the German and Italian troops as they retreated eastwards in the face of British forces intent on making a quick advance to Tunis.

The End of the Year in Tunisia

While Rommel's troops retreated along the Via Balbia, the coastal road to the west, German units in Tunisia had secured the valuable airfields at Bizerta and Tunis-El Aouina. On 17 November, *General* Walter Nehring arrived in Tunisia as leader of *Generalkommando* LXXXX. *Armee*korps to co-ordinate the defence of the area. The Allies had hoped that French forces would not resist, but there was sporadic opposition on the ground and in the air when, in the days immediately following the landing, Allied airmen in Algeria encountered aircraft of the French *Armée de l'Air* flown by pilots who supported the Vichy Government. Allied fighter pilots found this early opposition ineffective, unlike the *Luftwaffe* fighter units in Tunisia which offered far stiffer resistance.

On the ground, German troops in Tunisia had established a bridgehead and were strong enough to counter the offensives from Algeria, particularly as co-operation between Allied land and air forces was at that time poor and the air forces found it impossible to provide the level of air support demanded by the Army. JG 53 'Pik As', together with II./JG 51 and the two attached *Staffeln* were therefore able to repulse many attacks, often launched by American units whose pilots lacked combat

BELOW AND
OPPOSITE: The
end in Africa,
'Lightfoot'
(opposite) and
'Torch' (Below)
October 1942 to
May 1943



experience. By the end of November, the three *Gruppen* of the 'Pik As' *Geschwader* had claimed 26 victories, eight of them being P-38s, and *Major* Müller, *Kommandeur* of I./JG 53 and a holder of the Oak Leaves for his exploits in Russia, had increased his total to 104 *Luftsiege*. JG 53's losses in November amounted to seven pilots killed in combat plus a few others who were listed missing after a number of their transport aircraft were shot down over the sea. Material losses seem to have been relatively light as damaged aircraft could be easily repaired on the relatively good Tunisian airfields, new aircraft were arriving from Italy and, unlike on the Eighth Army front, there were few shortages.

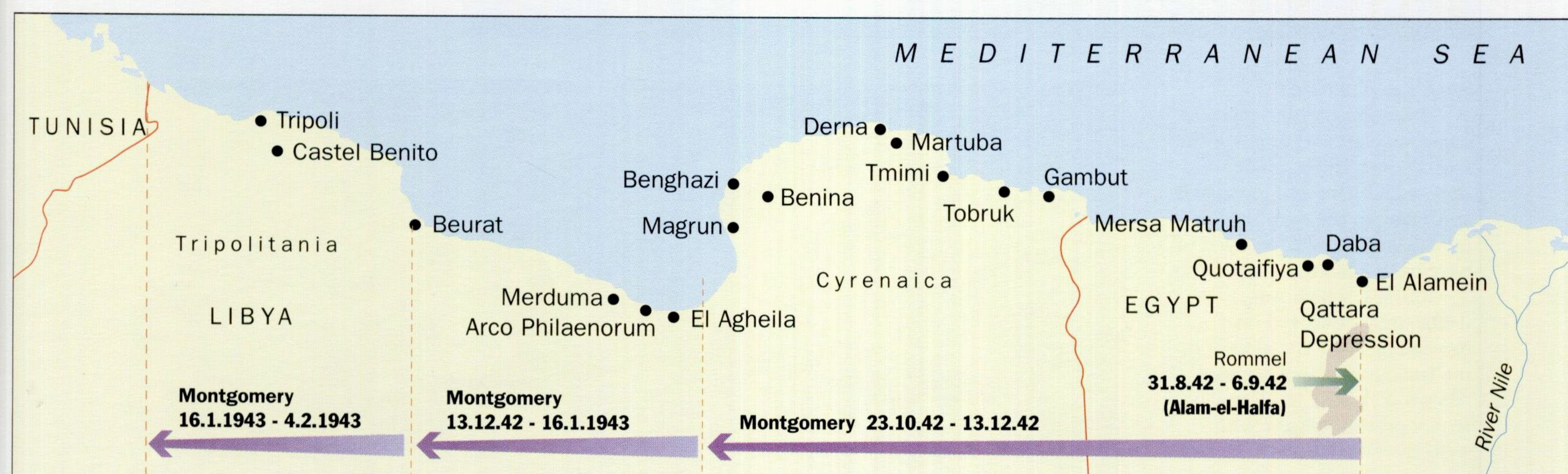
On 16 November, in II./JG 51's first engagement in the Mediterranean, *Hptm.* Grasser and *Fw.* Anton Hafner of 6./JG 51, who had received the *Ritterkreuz* on 23 August 1942 for his 60 victories, each claimed a Spitfire and by the end of the month the *Gruppe*'s pilots had claimed 18 victories in their new theatre of war. On the 28th, however, while engaged with Spitfires near Bizerta, the *Gruppe* lost two pilots in aerial combat and two others wounded, although Hafner shot down a four-engined bomber which he recorded as a Stirling but which was probably an American aircraft or an RAF Halifax.

The pilots of II./JG 2 claimed three victories in the last week of the month but on the 28th a severe bombing raid caught some of its aircraft on the ground at Bizerta. Several machines were destroyed and damaged, and a *Lt.* Theobald Eicher, reported as being a member of 7./JG 2, probably on loan to II. *Gruppe*, was killed.

Meanwhile, the Allied land forces had begun to push forward towards Tunisia and had made contact with the first German patrols. Heavy fighting developed around Medjez-el-Bab where 10. *Panzerdivision* fought hard before withdrawing on 26 November. At the beginning of December, the British First Army was held by a series of German strongpoints in the hilly terrain and an attack on Djedeida was repulsed. On 7 December, *Generaloberst* Hans-Jürgen von Arnim arrived in Tunis to command a new army in Tunisia by transforming LXXXX. *Armeekorps* into V. *Panzerarmee*. The arrival of bad weather favoured the defenders and Allied ground forces were unable to break through against stubborn German resistance and were forced to retire. The Germans now began to edge forward to meet the Allies and when they established a new front, the Allied High Command realised that Tunis would certainly not fall before the new year.

In the air, German fighter units claimed 120 *Luftsiege*, of which JG 53 claimed 77, II./JG 51 claimed 34 and II./JG 2 claimed nine. As on the El Alamein front, these *Abschüsse* were mainly fighters, predominantly Spitfires and P-38s, but two B-17s were also shot down. One, on 18 December, was attributed to the *Kommodore* of JG 53, *Obstlt.* Günther von Maltzahn as his 67th victory, and the other was claimed eight days later by *Lt.* Wilhelm Crinius, a pilot with 3./JG 53, as his 105th *Abschuss* and his only victory over a four-engined aircraft. Earlier, on 23 September 1942, Crinius had received both the Knight's Cross and the Oak Leaves on the same day, a very rare event, in recognition of his 100 victories over Soviet aircraft. Soon he would be credited with an additional 14 Allied machines.

On 4 December, 11./JG 26 was officially disbanded and its pilots are believed to have joined II./JG 51, although one source states the *Staffel* was not disbanded until March when its pilots were subordinated to JG 53. The 11. *Staffel* of JG 2 'Richthofen' operating under JG 53 seems to have remained independent until February 1943. Also on the 4th, in a notable engagement, I. and II./JG 53 intercepted a formation of eleven Bisley bombers of 18 and 614 Sqns which, despite many Allied fighters operating in the area, were unescorted. Although the German pilots overclaimed and were later credited with 12 victories – more than the number of enemy aircraft operating – the whole formation



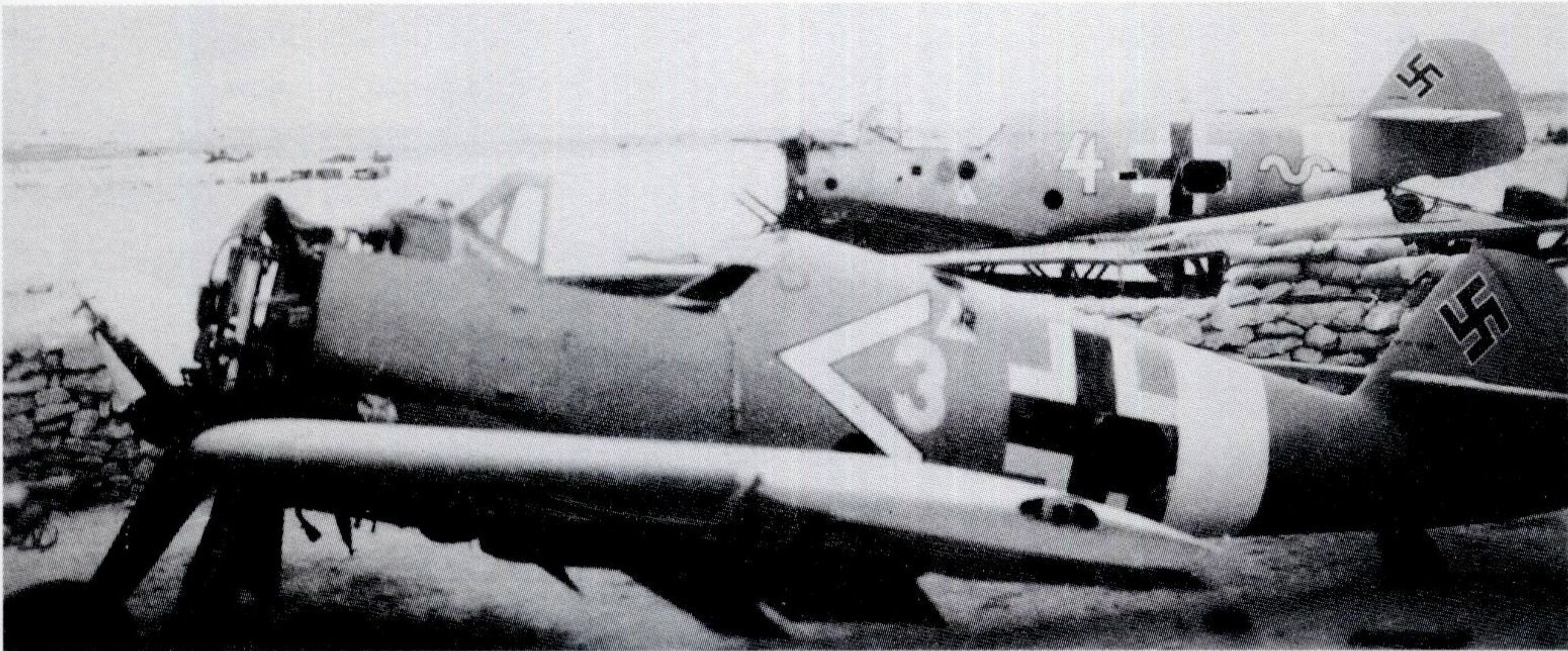
was destroyed and thereafter the Bisley was confined to night operations. In this engagement, *Oblt.* Julius Meimberg of the attached 11./JG 2 was credited with shooting down three Bisleys. Another very successful pilot was *Fw.* Anton ‘Toni’ Hafner who was credited that month with ten of the 34 *Luftsiege* claimed by 11./JG 51 in December.

On 30 December, *Lt.* Hubert Greim, also of 11./JG 2, was reported captured near Ain-Draham when operating with 6./JG 53, one of the seven ‘*Pik As*’ pilots killed, missing or captured during the month. One of the greatest losses was *Ofw.* Ludwig Reibel of 1./JG 53 who was shot down and killed by anti-aircraft fire while ground-strafting at Souk-el-Arba on 20 December. He had been credited with 38 victories and had been decorated with the German Cross in Gold.

Pilot and aircraft losses in 11./JG 51 were light in December, with only nine machines damaged or destroyed and two pilots wounded. Similarly, losses in 11./JG 2 were also light, the only pilot killed on operations being *Fw.* Gerhard Heinz of 6./JG 2 who, on 17 December, experienced engine failure, landed in the sea off Bizerta and drowned. Two pilots were wounded during an engagement with Spitfires over Bizerta on the 3rd, and the sole non-operational loss was *Uffz.* August Stiefelhagen who was killed in a crash near Carcassonne in France during a transfer flight.

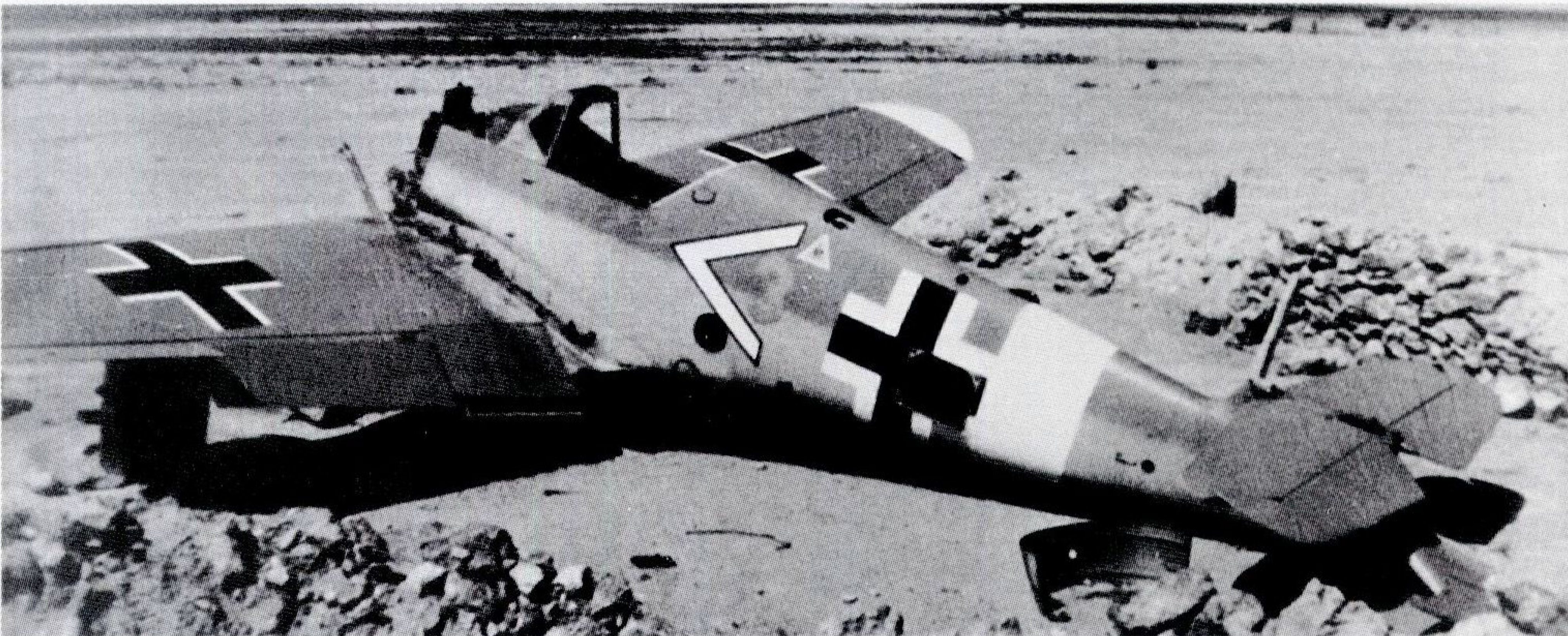
Ironically, whereas for much of the desert campaign German forces had been starved of reinforcements at a time when their commitment very probably would have enabled Rommel to defeat the British in Africa, now that the prospect of the loss of Africa was almost a certainty, *OKW* poured ammunition, troops, equipment and armour, including the very latest Tiger tanks, into Tunis. The *Luftwaffe* too was considerably reinforced with many units coming directly from the Eastern Front, such was the price *OKW* was prepared to pay in order to avoid the total destruction of Rommel’s army and the rapid loss of North Africa. The following table, which shows the strength of the *Luftwaffe* in all theatres in December 1942, illustrates how important the Mediterranean theatre of operations was now considered:

Theatre	Bomber Gruppen	Day Fighter Gruppen	Stuka Gruppen
Norway/Finland	3	4	1
Eastern Front	24	14	8
Mediterranean	20	10	3
Western Front	8	8	0
Germany	0	4	0

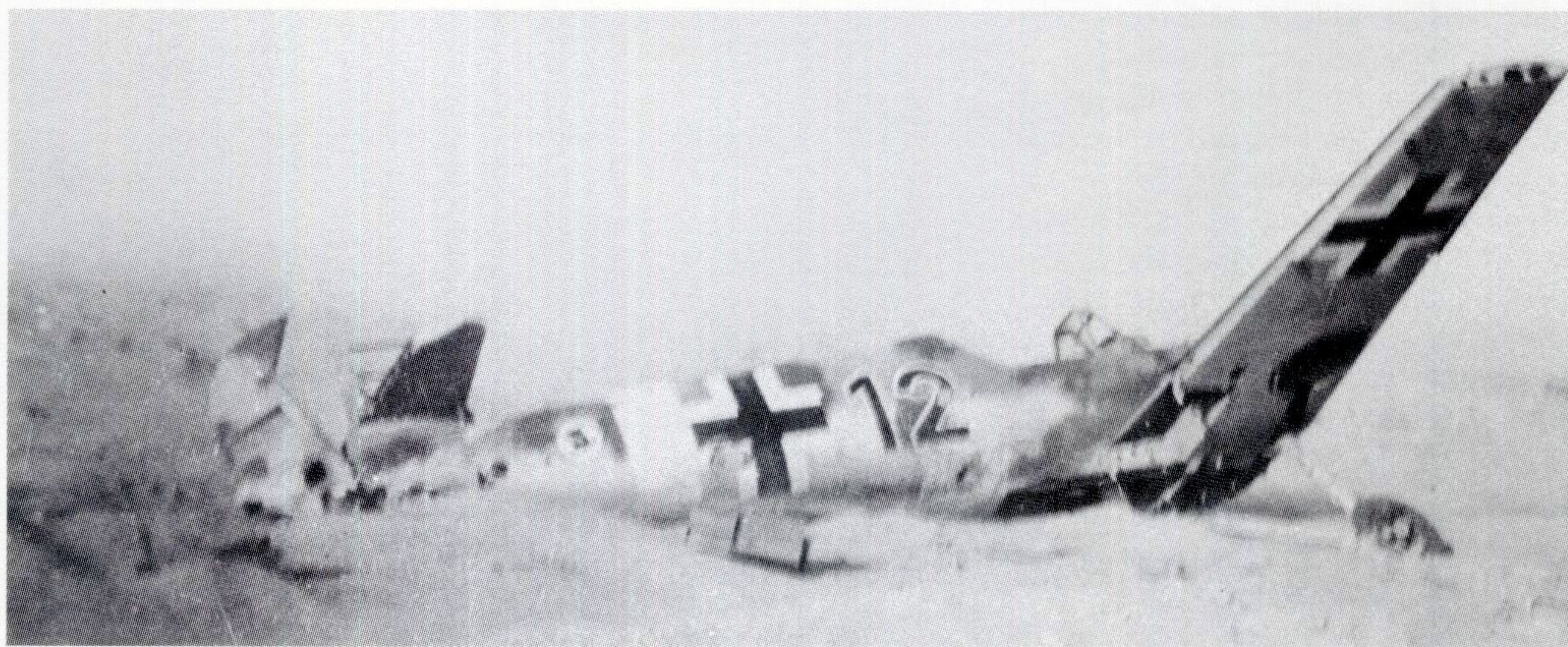


ABOVE AND RIGHT:

A collection point for captured enemy aircraft at Gambut at the end of 1942. The machine shown in the foreground above and again on the right belonged to Stab/JG 77 and is believed to have been a Bf 109 G-2, possibly W.Nr. 10501, which was deliberately destroyed on 4 November 1942. The aircraft in the background above, coded ‘Yellow 4’, is a Bf 109 F trop which previously flew with 9./JG 27.

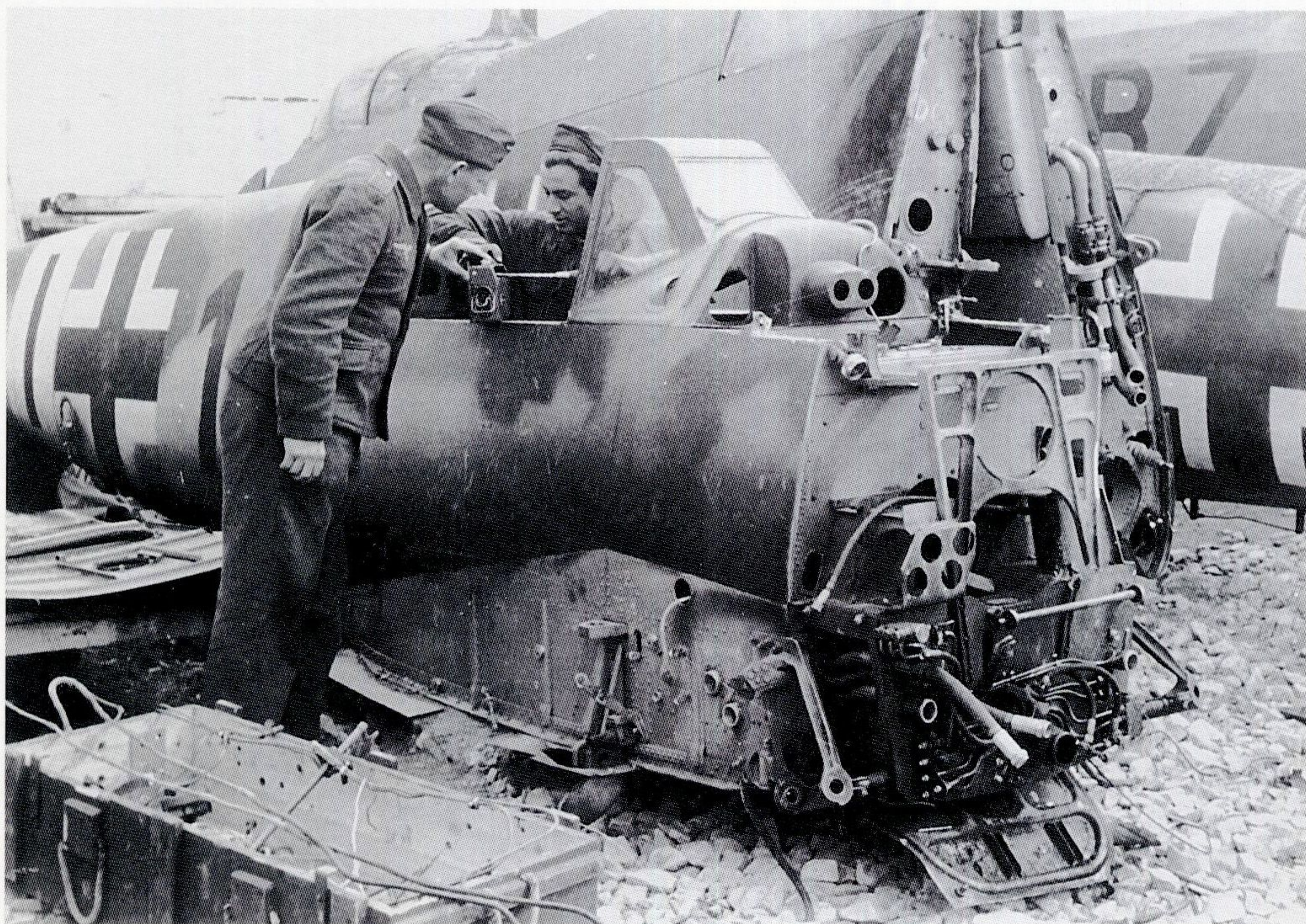


RIGHT: 'Black 12', a Bf 109 G-2 of 2./JG 77 as found by advancing Allied forces following their breakthrough at the end of 1942. The white theatre band around the rear fuselage has been positioned further forward than usual in order to avoid obscuring the Staffel's top hat insignia which dated back to 2./J88 in the Spanish Civil War and was also used by 2./JG 77's predecessor 2.(Jagd)/LG 2. Although of poor quality, this photograph clearly shows that large, dark green mottles have been applied over the mid-demarcation 79 Sandgelb uppersurfaces. Note the rectangular areas on the rudder where souvenir-hunters have cut away those parts of the fabric which carried victory bars. This aircraft was probably fitted with a sand filter.



Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-2 trop 'Black 12' of 2./JG 77, late 1942

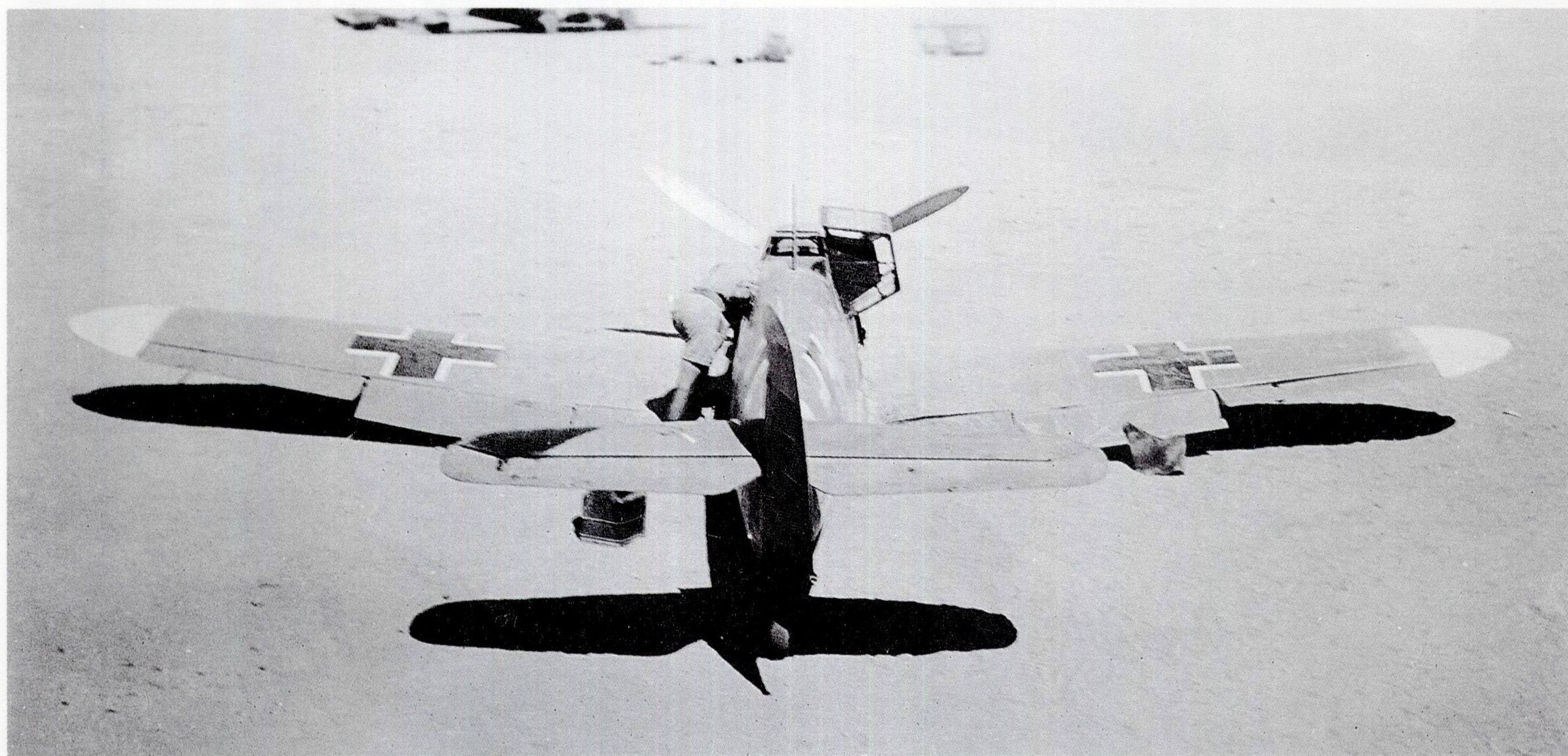
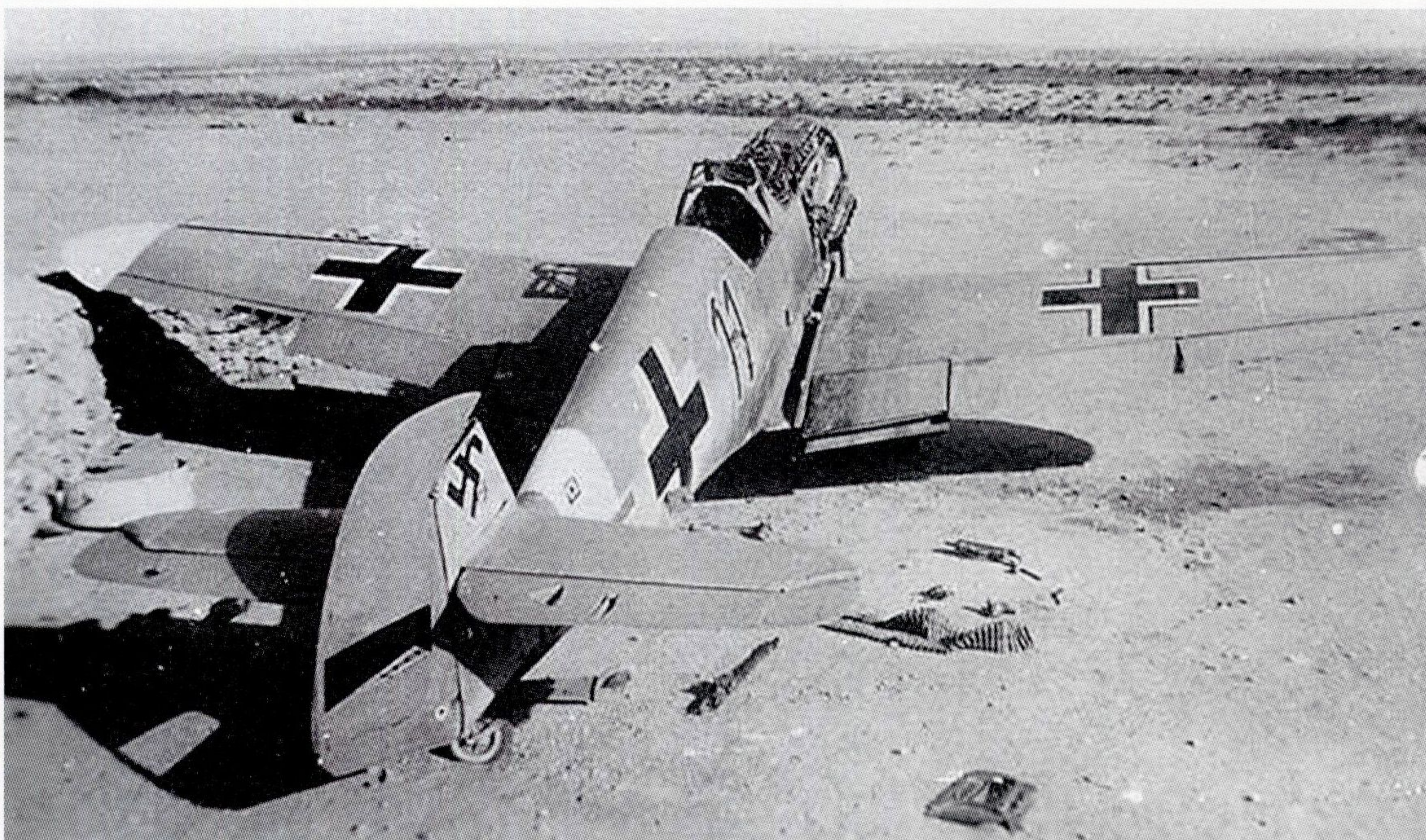
The camouflage shown here was applied to a number of aircraft delivered to JG 77 and comprised a mid-demarcation scheme of 78 and 79 with large, dark green mottles sprayed over the tan. The aircraft's probable appearance has been reconstructed from the above photograph and is depicted here with a white spinner and completely white wingtips as the theatre markings. From the size of the hole left in the rudder where the victory markings have been removed, it is estimated that the machine carried up to eight victory bars, probably in black, and this detail has been shown accordingly. Although the top hat insignia of 2./JG 77 is usually shown black, as here, it is interesting to note that an RAF report on German aircraft examined in Tunisia mentions a similar Bf 109 G-2 trop coded 'Black 11', and describes the unit badge as a red top hat on a white disc.



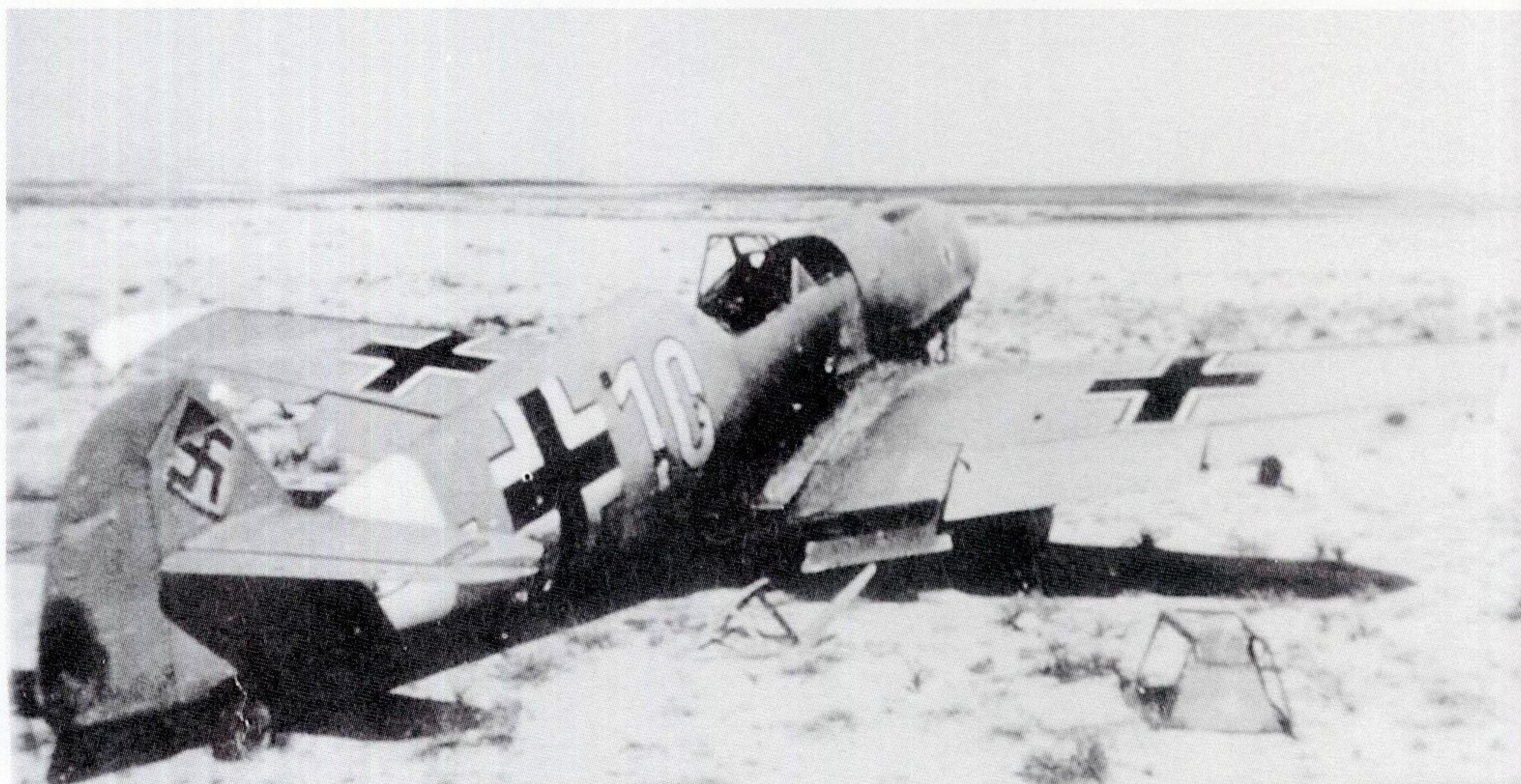
LEFT: The same camouflage scheme may be seen again in this photograph of German ground personnel examining the salvaged remains of another Bf 109 G, 'Black 1', possibly of 8./JG 53 or perhaps 8./JG 77.

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: Little is known about the aircraft shown on these pages, other than that they were all photographed by Allied personnel at various times and places in the Western Desert. Although lacking any comprehensive detail, they are nevertheless considered of sufficient interest to justify publication. Readers with further information are invited to contact the publishers.

RIGHT: The shattered windscreen on 'Black 11' of 5./JG 27 suggests it may have had a demolition charge placed in the engine before it was abandoned by the Luftwaffe. It is not known whether the machine gun and ammunition belt lying on the ground was removed by Luftwaffe or Allied personnel. Note the rectangular areas on each side of the rudder, evidently where a souvenir hunter has removed the pilot's victory markings, and that the horizontal Gruppe bar appears to have been yellow, outlined white.

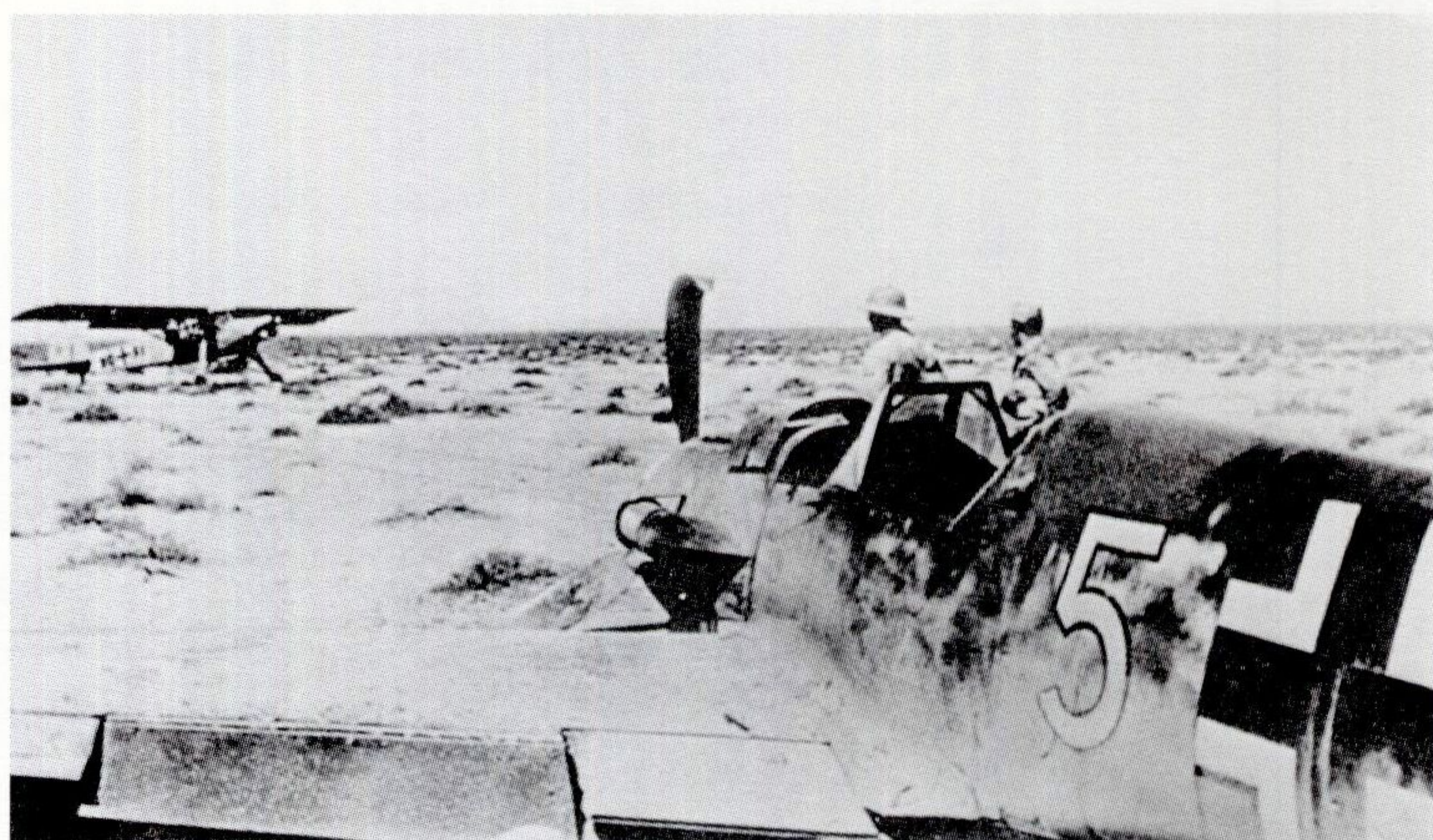
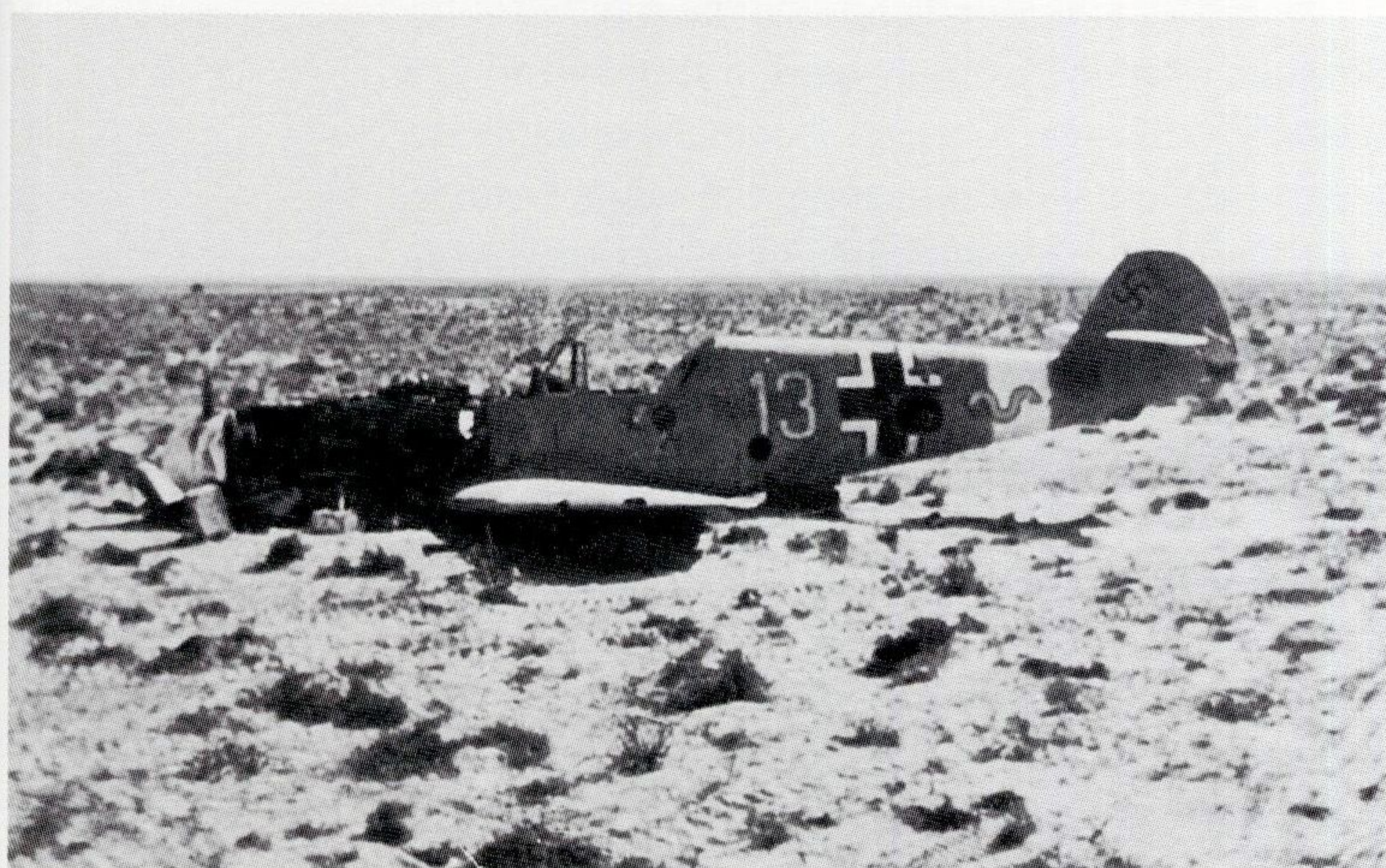


ABOVE: An unidentified Bf 109 showing the overall RLM Sandgelb upper surface camouflage and white wingtips.



RIGHT: 'Yellow 10', an abandoned Bf 109 F of 6./JG 27, showing that an attempt has been made to remove the Hakenkreuz. Note the particularly heavy exhaust staining on the fuselage side of this aircraft.

BELOW: A crash-landed Bf 109 F of 9./JG 27 coded 'Yellow 13' and marked with the wavy bar which III./JG 27 continued to use as a Gruppe symbol throughout 1942 and 1943.



ABOVE: 'White 5', a crash landed Bf 109 F in the desert. This machine has not yet been positively identified but the style of numeral on the fuselage side suggests it may have belonged to 1./JG 27. Unusually for a machine from this Geschwader, however, it retains a European camouflage scheme.



ABOVE: Another Bf 109 F-4, this example being 'Yellow 10' which carried a vertical bar as the III. Gruppe symbol and was marked with the frequently observed but non-standard fuselage crosses. Just visible on the cowlings lying near the nose is part of a 'Pik As' emblem which, together with the yellow numeral, indicates that this aircraft belonged to 9./JG 53. It was almost certainly photographed on one of the aerodromes at Quotaiyya where many of this unit's aircraft were damaged and destroyed by Allied bombing.



RIGHT: This aircraft, possibly a Bf 109 G, is believed to have been photographed at Martuba in November 1942. The aircraft in the background is an Italian Macchi 202.

Jabos in Africa

In addition to the pure fighter units, a number of *Jabo* and *Schlacht* – or fighter-bomber and ground-attack – units also operated in the Western Desert and, later, were increasingly used in Tunisia. The first arrivals were the two *Staffeln* 10.(*Jabo*)/JG 27 and 10.(*Jabo*)/JG 53 which began operations towards the end of June 1942 and by October had already been reorganised and were operating as a single *Gruppe*, known as *Jabogruppe Afrika*, under the command of *Oblt.* Werner Langemann, the former *Staffelkapitän* of 10.(*Jabo*)/JG 53. For two months these were the only two *Jabo Staffeln* in Africa, but at the end of August they were joined by a complete *Jabo Gruppe*, III./*Zerstörergeschwader* 1. This unit was equipped with Bf 109 Es and during the Summer of 1942 had been based at Tagenrog, in Southern Russia. In August, with 35 aircraft, it had been withdrawn to Munich/Neubiburg prior to being ordered to the Mediterranean theatre and by the beginning of September the *Gruppe* had already moved up to Quotaifiya, a landing ground a few miles west of Daba, in Egypt.

On 25 October, two days after Montgomery launched his El Alamein offensive, Kesselring signalled *Fliegerführer Afrika* that the *Panzerarmee* was demanding that the *Luftwaffe* should be further reinforced but already plans existed to transfer additional fighter units to the area as well as a *Staffel* of Hs 129 anti-tank aircraft. As well as carrying out bombing and strafing operations in the forward area of the battlefield, the specific targets assigned to *Jabogruppe Afrika* and III./ZG 1 included naval formations, tanks, motor transport and artillery positions.

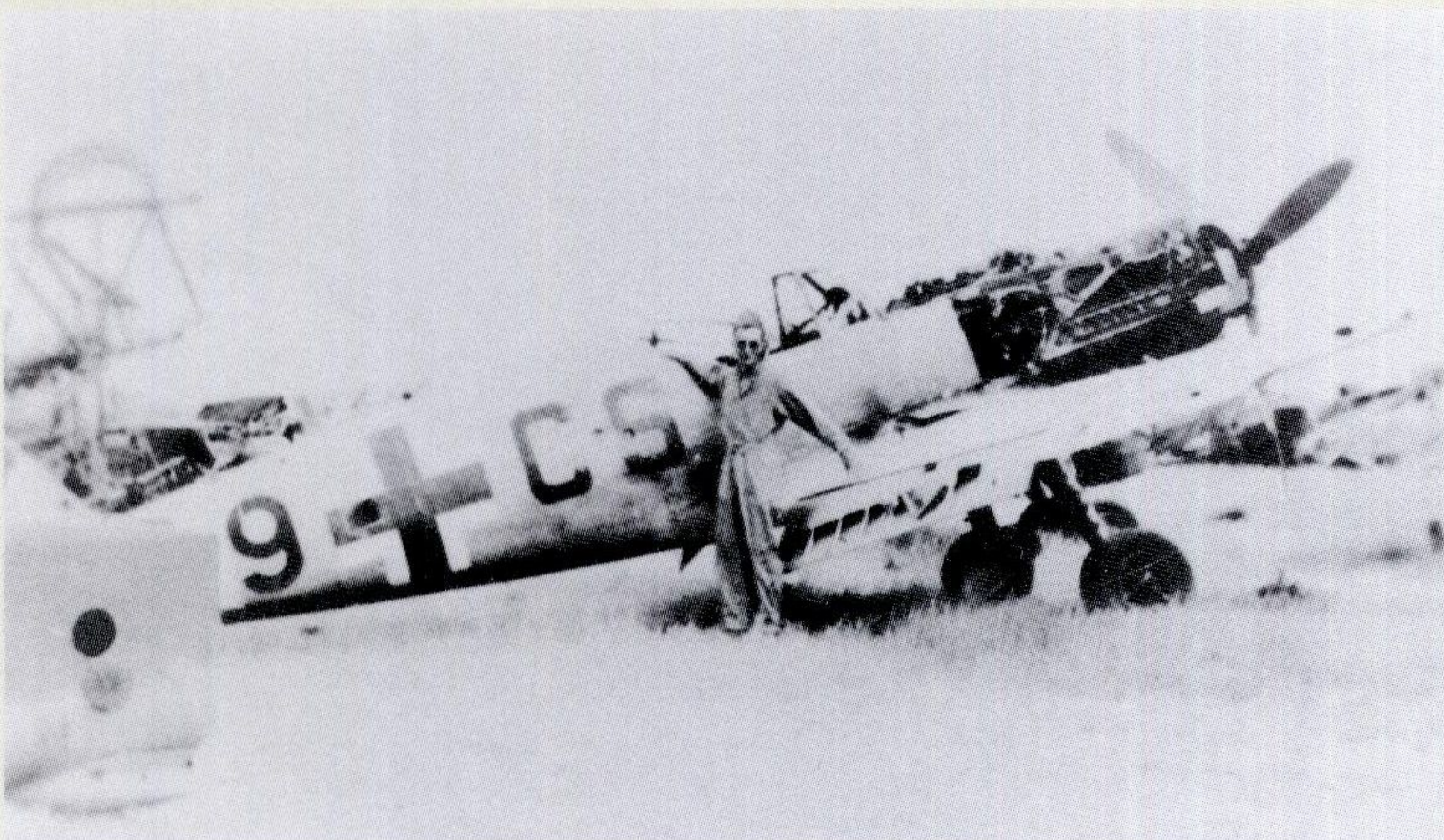
Shortly afterwards, III./ZG 1 was redesignated I./*Schlachtgeschwader* 2, but as both *Jabogruppe Afrika* and I./Sch.G 2 suffered heavily, there was a further reorganisation when *Jabogruppe Afrika* was disbanded and its remaining aircraft and crews merged with I./Sch.G 2 in order to provide reinforcements. Gradually, the *Gruppe* was also modernised as its Bf 109 E-7s were replaced with Bf 109 F-4s which became available as the *Jagdgeschwader* JG 27 and JG 53 re-equipped with the Bf 109 G-2. One of the aircraft already taken over by I./Sch.G 2 was a Bf 109 F-4 *trop* W.Nr 8673, coded 'White 11', which had earlier been flown by Hans-Joachim Marseille, but this was lost as early as 22 October. For a while, I./Sch.G 2 operated with a mixture of Bf 109 E-7s and Bf 109 F-4s, but as more fighter units donated their surplus F-4s, so the E-7s were phased out.

At the end of October, a new III./ZG 1 arrived in Crete with 11 Bf 210s. This unit was at first mainly engaged in escorting convoys and Ju 52 transport aircraft, but following the 'Torch' landing the *Gruppe* transferred to North Africa. Also as part of the vigorous German response to the Allied landings, the first Fw 190 units arrived in early November. Tropical tests with the Fw 190 had first been carried out at Benina and Derna in early August 1942 but had shown that the standard types then in service were unsuitable for use in the desert mainly due to inadequacies associated with

BELOW AND BOTTOM RIGHT: These photographs show various Bf 109 Es of III./ZG 1, all carrying the full four-digit code, although the last two letters on the machine (BELOW) are obscured by the aircraft's wing. The aircraft coded S9+IS shown (BOTTOM RIGHT) is a Bf 109 E-7, W.Nr 6431, shot down on 1 November 1942.



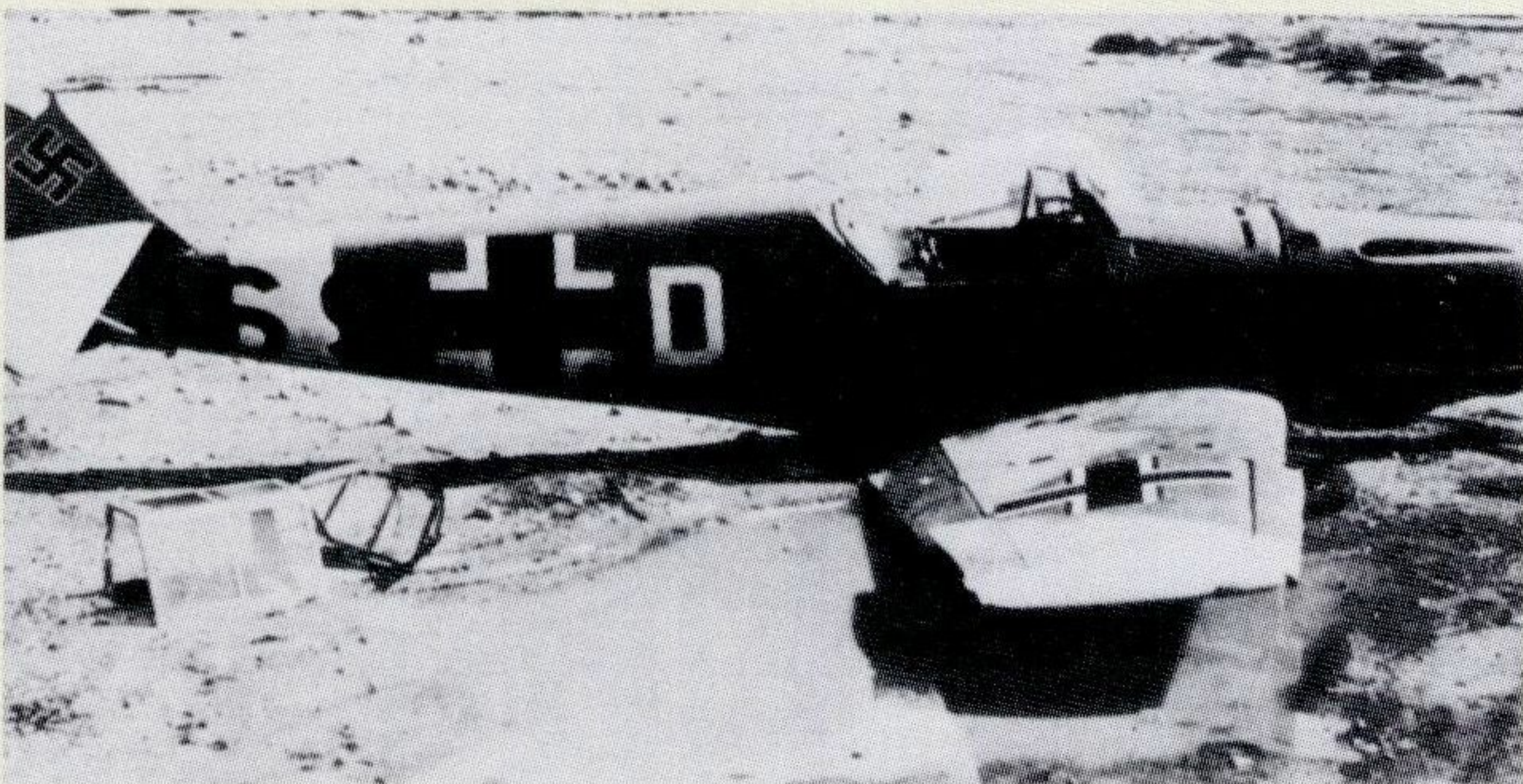
BELOW: A US serviceman posing by the remains of S9+CS, another of III./ZG 1's fighter-bombers.



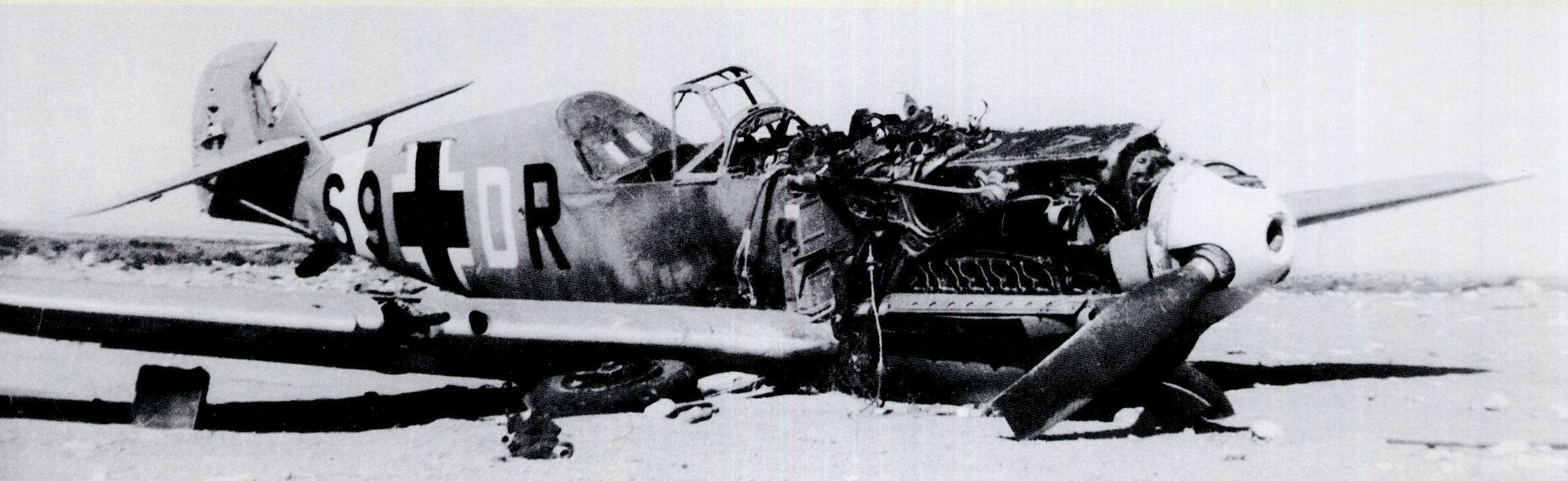


Messerschmitt Bf 109 E-7 S9+DR of III./ZG 1, Libya, late 1942

Although III./ZG 1 moved from the Russian Front to the Mediterranean in some haste, photographs confirm that the European scheme on this Gruppe's aircraft was overpainted in the tropical colours RLM 78/79, but on this aircraft it seems as if a replacement starboard wing, still retaining an 02/71 splinter pattern, has been fitted. Appropriate theatre markings were added comprising a white spinner, wingtips and rear fuselage band, and the full code S9+DR appeared on both sides of the fuselage. Note that the Balkenkreuze on the fuselage sides are of unusual proportions and although this aircraft is an E-7, it lacks the capped spinner normally seen on this sub-type.



THIS PAGE: Coded S9+DR, this crash-landed Bf 109, is another E-7 which was disarmed by the appropriate authorities but then progressively stripped by souvenir hunters. As with all captured German aircraft, the swastika on the tail was a particularly prized item and was frequently the first item to disappear. Note that on the port fuselage side, the white letter 'D' was probably outlined in black in order to make it visible against the white rear fuselage band.





ABOVE: When the Bf 109-equipped III./ZG 1 was redesignated I./Sch.G 2, a new III./ZG 1 equipped with Me 210 A-1s was formed and appeared in North Africa in November 1942. The Gruppe was very active, carrying out bombing and strafing sorties against Allied transport and troop columns. Here, aircraft of the reformed II./ZG 1 prepare for another mission in Tunisia in 1943.

The fighter-bomber unit III./ZG 2 first went into action on 18 November when 12 Fw 190s took off from Sidi Ahmed airfield and attacked lorries east of Tabarca and west of Djabioud, claiming good results. On the same day, the unit mounted another 13 Fw 190 sorties which were directed against motorised columns west and east of Medjez, where several hits were claimed. In December, III./ZG 2 was redesignated III./SKG 10 and the fighter-bomber force was strengthened on 18 April when *Hptm.* Werner Dörnbrack, the *Kommandeur* of the ground-attack unit II./*Schlachtgeschwader* 2, reported his arrival at Sidi Ahmed with 17 Fw 190 A-5/U3 *trop* aircraft. *Hptm.* Dörnbrack himself was very experienced in ground-attack work and was a holder of the *Ritterkreuz*. He had been a *Schlachtflieger* since 1936 and had taken part in the campaigns against Poland, France, Great Britain, Greece and Russia.

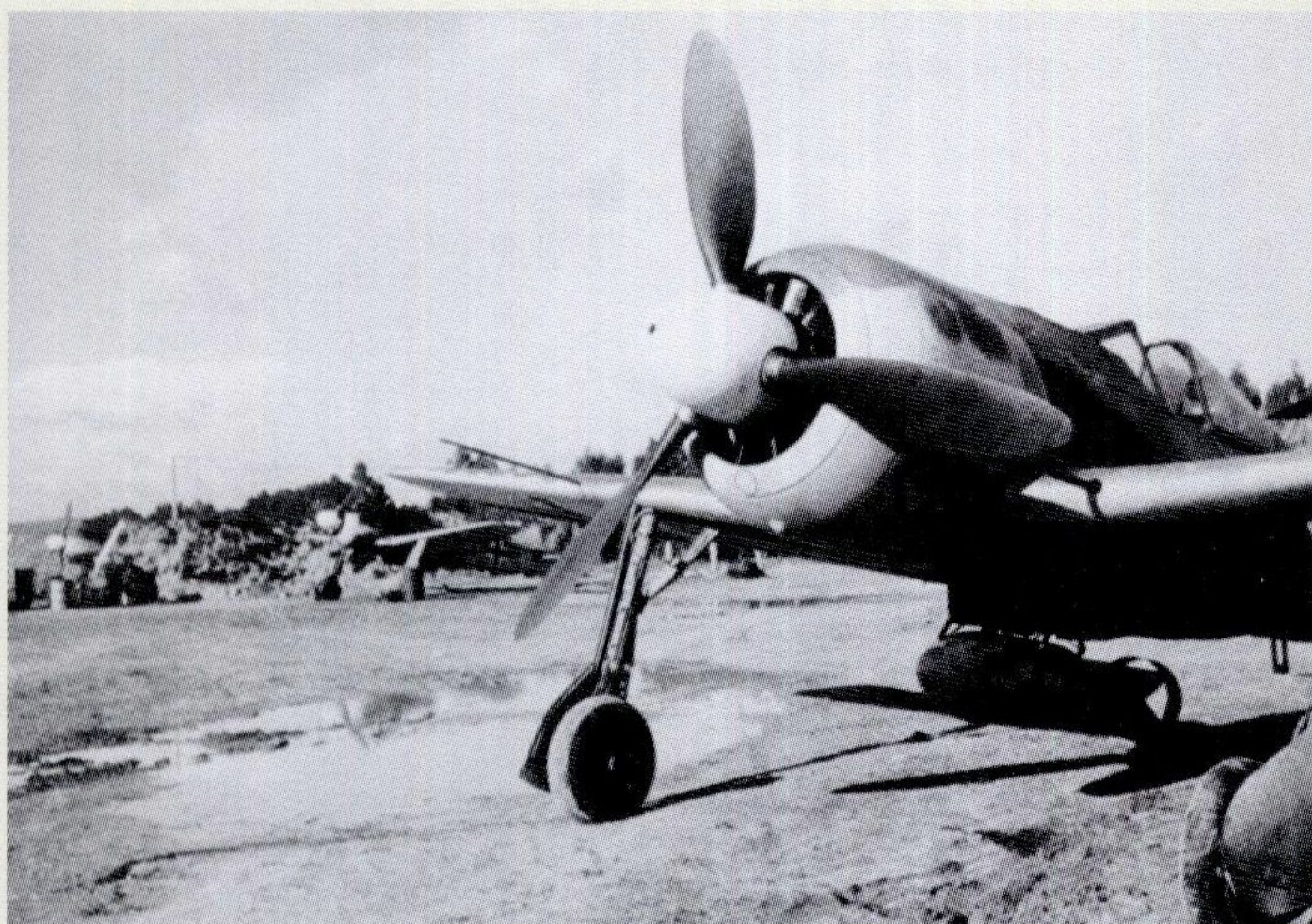
One anecdote from this period concerns *Uffz.* Friedrich Rott of 11./SKG 10 who, about the end of March, was returning from a mission in his Fw 190 A-4 when he became involved in a fight with a Spitfire IX at about 4,000 feet some 20 miles south-west of La Fauconnerie. For some time the two pilots fought, each trying to outmanoeuvre the other but with neither being able to obtain an advantage. After some ten minutes, Rott's aircraft began to run short of fuel and he spent a few more worried minutes considering his next move until he decided that, as the Spitfire pilot was probably also returning from an operation, he might also be short of fuel and would be unable to continue the fight much longer. Rott therefore took a chance and rocked his wings – a farewell sign among pilots. The Spitfire responded with the same signal, whereupon the two pilots broke combat and gave each other a salute before heading in opposite directions.

When the German Air Historical Branch later prepared a report² on the air war in Tunisia, it concluded that, as the battlefield extended over a large area and the two fronts consisted very often of widely dispersed strongpoints, the *Schlachtflieger*, with their great mobility and effective armament, played an important part in the land fighting. Attacks were carried out against airfields, railways, roads, road transport, anti-aircraft positions, concentrations of tanks and vehicles, camps and any

the oil cooler and sand filter. The Fw 190 was therefore withdrawn but re-introduced to this theatre in November following improvements and modifications.

The first Fw 190s to arrive were the fighters of *Oblt.* Adolf Dickfeld's II./JG 2 and the *Jabos* of III./*Zerstörergeschwader* 2 under the command of *Hptm.* Wilhelm Hachfeld. The appearance of these Fw 190 aircraft in North Africa posed a serious threat to the Allies on account of their performance which was superior to all British and American aircraft then operating in the theatre. In addition, as the Allied ground organisation – and consequently its air force – was weak, it seemed for a while that the *Jagdwaaffe* might gain air superiority. In the event the Allies employed even the small forces at their disposal most aggressively, so forcing the German fighters onto the defensive.

BELOW: In December 1942, III./ZG 2 was redesignated III./SKG 10 and the pilot of this damaged Fw 190 coded 'Black 9' is thought to have been *Uffz.* Georg Rischbieter of 10./SKG 10 who collided with a Spitfire on 2 January 1943. An unusual feature on this machine is the shield badge of III./SKG 10 which has been painted just below the windscreen instead of in the more usual position on the engine cowling. Possibly this was the position originally selected but was found unsuitable due to the effects of exhaust staining. Also unusual for a machine in the Mediterranean theatre is that the spinner has been left in Green 70.



RIGHT: The effect of the seasonal rains is evident in this photograph showing a number of Fw 190s of a ground-attack unit in late 1942. Unfortunately, as no unit markings or aircraft codes are visible, the Gruppe to which these machines belonged is not known for certain although one source states III./ZG 2.



other concentration or movement of troops and materials near the front lines. This support was of great value to the army as it frequently influenced the course of a local battle and was equally relevant to the German strategy of gaining time in order that the defences in Europe could be completed before the expected landings there took place.

Had these extra ground forces, armoured units and air units been made available months earlier, Rommel may well have achieved victory in Africa, but the arrival of these reinforcements and the modernisation of existing forces came too late to have any appreciable effect on the land battle. Whether operating against Montgomery's Eighth Army advancing from the east or against the forces of *'Torch'* in Tunisia, the situation was already beyond repair and, when forced to operate against Allied forces closing in from both sides, soon became hopeless. Nevertheless, the use of fighter-bombers for daylight operations continued in Tunisia until a few days before the final surrender, the last missions being flown from the northernmost tip of Cape Bon. When even this was no longer possible, all fighter-bomber and ground-attack units were ordered to transfer back to Sicily and to continue the fighting over Tunisia from there. However, with no transport space available for the ground crews, it was left to the units themselves to organise their own transport, and by removing all armour plating and radio equipment from the machines, it was found possible to load four members of the ground crew into the fuselage of each aircraft. Thus, each Fw 190 took to the air with up to five men aboard and after several flights, all ground personnel were safely back in Sicily.



LEFT: A line-up of ground-attack Fw 190s. Note again the Green 70 spinner on the aircraft in the centre and the more usual white spinner on the aircraft on the right. Unfortunately, positive unit identification is lacking.

RIGHT: Although the exact date and location of this photograph are unknown, it is presumed to have been taken towards the end of the campaign in North Africa. Of interest bottom left is the rear fuselage of the Bf 109 thought to have operated under Jabo Gruppe Afrika. Note the number '9' aft of the fuselage Balkenkreuz which may have been part of the S9 code used by III./ZG 1. The badge, superimposed on the white fuselage band, shows a bomb dropping on North Africa, as opposed to the silhouette of Malta used by 10.(Jabo)/JG 53. Clearly this was an intentional modification of the Malta badge representative of the unit's new designation. An RAF intelligence report mentions that the same badge was seen on two other Bf 109s found on Malaha aerodrome. Both were marked 'Black 8', but one also carried a chevron ahead of the numeral. In this photograph, the white-painted aircraft in the background is an Italian Caproni Ca 133, a reliable and versatile machine which, when obsolete as a bomber, was largely employed as a transport aircraft, although this particular example is in the markings of an air ambulance.



1 Later a Feldwebel, Georg Rischbieter flew with 6./SG 4, claimed at least four Spitfires shot down and was awarded the German Cross in Gold on 20 March 1944.

2 'A Tactical Appreciation of the Air War in Tunisia', dated 31 October 1944.

Through Libya to the West

Meanwhile, as the exhausted *Panzerarmee Afrika* and the Italian ground units retreated westwards, British forces recaptured Tobruk on 13 November and retook Benghazi on the 20th. The Allies now enjoyed overwhelming aerial superiority and *Stab*, I. and III./JG 77, supported by the remnants of II./JG 27, were not only outnumbered but were also short of aircraft and fuel. In order to put as many machines as possible into the air, some *Staffeln* were forced for a while to use old Bf 109 F-4s in place of their usual G-2s, but they were not sufficient to safely escort the fleets of Ju 52s attempting to bring in fuel and large numbers of the transports were attacked by enemy fighters and shot down.

In mid-November, JG 77 assembled on Arco Philaenorum airfield on the border between Cyrenaica and Tripolitania to rest, refit and reorganise. However, because of the fuel shortage, its operations during the latter part of November had to be limited and although priority was given to escort missions to protect ground-attack aircraft which were endeavouring to slow down Eighth Army's advance, JG 77 nevertheless claimed eight victories, including two B-24s, on the 5th. Officially, six aircraft were lost but many additional fighters, especially those damaged in crash-landings, could not be recovered and were abandoned during the retreat.

For a few days, II./JG 27 was also based at Arco Philaenorum but then transferred to Magrun and Merduma. In the last part of November, the *Gruppe* lost two pilots from 5. *Staffel* but claimed five victories. As with JG 77, material losses were certainly more than declared in the official lists and at least three aircraft had to be abandoned and blown up by retreating ground crews. On 2 December, 4./JG 27 lost Lt. Werner Schäfer; and on the 6th, in the *Gruppe*'s last mission in Libya, Lt. Hans Lewes shot down a P-40 as his first victory. In the following days II./JG 27 left Libya, leaving its four surviving Bf 109 F-4s and four G-2s behind for other units. The flying personnel and the greater part of the ground personnel were then transported to Italy before, finally, after their many months of operations in Africa, they were granted a long home leave in Germany.

II./JG 27 was replaced by Major Anton Mader's II./JG 77 which arrived directly from Russia, losing Uffz. Burckhard Gransow of 5./JG 77 en route, killed in Sicily when his Bf 109 G-2 developed an engine problem. Gransow had claimed 15 victories in Russia.

Jagdgeschwader 77 was now reunited and complete with the *Stab* and three *Gruppen*. In December 1942, the *Geschwader* claimed 58 *Luftsiege* over Libya, victories being awarded, as usual, to the most well-known names. Thus on the 10th, *Hptm.* Bär shot down six P-40s and a Spitfire, bringing his total to 136, while *Oblt.* Freytag claimed his 82nd and *Ofw.* Brandt his 38th. The *Kommodore*, Major Joachim Müncheberg, claimed his 119th victory on the 10th and his 120th and 121st on the 14th.

II./JG 77 flew its first mission in North Africa on 20 December, during which the *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 77, *Oblt.* Anton Hackl, claimed two P-40s and brought his total to 120. Two other pilots of his *Staffel* were also successful: *Oblt.* Burchard Böker shot down two Kittyhawks as his 15th and 16th *Abschüsse* and *Oblt.* Franz Hrdlicka claimed his 27th, but JG 77 also suffered some serious losses. On 11 December, the *Staffelführer* of 9./JG 77, Lt. Horst Marotzke, was reported missing. He had been decorated with the German Cross in Gold and had been credited with 34 aircraft destroyed in Russia and, since arriving in Africa, had shot down four Allied fighters. On 30 December, *Oblt.* Böker was lost.

At the end of the year, JG 77 could assemble 89 aircraft, of which only 51 were serviceable. When compared with the Allies' overwhelming forces, this number of fighters was clearly inadequate, and the position of the German fighter forces facing Eighth Army was not improved when, at the end of December, III./JG 53 was sent to San Pietro in Sicily to aid the air defence of the island and to escort convoys sailing to and from Tunisia.

The weather in North Africa in the Winter of 1942-1943 was the worst for many years and slowed down all military operations. At the same time, the situation in Russia, where General Friedrich Paulus's 6. *Armee*, was surrounded at Stalingrad, prevented any further reinforcements from being sent to Tunisia but, with limited forces, von Arnim counter-attacked against the American, British and French forces advancing towards Tunis. Although von Arnim was unable to defeat the enemy, it was a resounding demonstration of the Germans' determination to defend Tunisia.

At the same time, German fighters were very active and in January, JG 53 claimed 51 victories, mainly fighters but including two B-17s, a B-24, one B-26 and a few Bostons. That month, increased losses in the 'Pik As' *Geschwader* amounted to eight pilots killed, one missing and one captured. The captured pilot was the famous *Ritterkreuzträger* Lt. Wilhelm Crinius of 3./JG 53, who was shot down during an engagement with Spitfires on the 13th. Crinius had been credited with 114 victories and his great experience would be missed in his unit. On the 18th, *Oblt.* Wolfgang Tonne of the same *Staffel* claimed a Spitfire as his 110th *Luftsieg*.

The II./JG 51 claimed 39 victories, the majority, as with JG 53, being fighters with a few Marauder and Boston bombers. While the well-established *Hptm.* Hartmann Grasser was credited with two victories, a number of new *Experten* began to appear with *Ofw.* Otto Schultz of 4./JG 51 shooting down seven aircraft that month while *Lt.* Herbert Puschmann of 6./JG 51 claimed three victories on 23 January and two more on the 31st. Both Schultz and Puschmann would later receive the *Ritterkreuz*. Although II./JG 51 lost only two pilots killed and one captured in January, the two pilots killed were both *Staffelkapitäne*. *Oblt.* Hans Heidrich of 6./JG 51 shot down two P-38s on 2 January, bringing his score to eight, but was lost on 12 January while escorting Ju 88s over Tunisia. He was replaced by *Lt.* 'Puschi' Puschmann. *Lt.* Ralph Furch, *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 51, was hit by friendly *Flak* near Medenine on the 22nd and baled out too low for his parachute to open. He had been credited with 29 victories, of which six were achieved in Africa, and had been awarded the German Cross in Gold. He was replaced by *Oblt.* Günther Rübell who, at that time, had around 40 claims.

The JG 51 pilot taken prisoner was *Fw.* Günther Allmenroeder of 6. *Staffel* who was captured near El Guettar on 17 January after claiming four victories in the first half of the month. Another casualty was *Lt.* 'Toni' Hafner, who was wounded in combat with a Spitfire near Pont-du-Fahs on the 14th. Hafner, who had been credited with 20 victories over Tunisia and had a total score of 82 victories, baled out of his Bf 109 G-2 but broke an arm in the process and had to leave the theatre.

In II./JG 2, nine of the 26 victories claimed in January were awarded to *Lt.* Kurt Bühlingen, the *Ritterkreuzträger* and *Staffelkapitän* of 4./JG 2, who at that time had a total of 30 victories. Another four victories were awarded to *Oblt.* Erich Rudorffer, another Knight's Cross holder and *Staffelkapitän* of 6./JG 2, now with 45 *Abschüsse*. One 6./JG 2 pilot who scored his first two victories in January was *Lt.* Fritz Karch, a former flying instructor and future *Ritterkreuzträger*. The *Gruppe* lost two pilots, one being *Uffz.* Heinz Gabler of 4./JG 2 who had been credited with three victories that month but was reported missing near Kairouan after an engagement with P-40s on the 21st. The *Kommandeur*, *Oblt.* Dickfeld was himself injured while taking off from Kairouan during a bomber raid on the airfield and his Fw 190 A-4 overturned after either running into a crater or being caught by blast. Dickfeld suffered a fractured skull and was evacuated to Berlin for treatment.

Also operating in North Africa at that time with the Fw 190 were parts of SKG 10. Although essentially a ground-attack unit operating mainly in support of the ground troops, it also on occasions went into action against Allied aircraft and three claims were made in January by pilots from 9. and 10./SKG 10.

February 1943 was the last complete month of operations in the Mediterranean theatre for II./JG 2 which, in a final act before leaving the area, was very successful and shot down 63 enemy aircraft. Its most notable days were the 9th, when it accounted for 15 victories, the 14th, when it shot down 11 aircraft, and the 15th when its pilots claimed 13 victories. Remarkably, in view of the Allies' superiority, 21 of these victories went to *Lt.* Kurt Bühlingen, while *Oblt.* Rudorffer was credited with 18. Another '*Draufgänger*', or daredevil, was *Ofw.* Kurt Goltzsch of 5./JG 2, one of the *Geschwader's* '*Alte Hasen*' – '*Old Hares*' – who had joined the unit in 1940 but spent a long time as an instructor at a flying school. After returning to the unit at the end of 1942, Goltzsch was credited with 14 victories over Tunisia, eleven of which were in February alone.

The only pilot lost to II./JG 2 in aerial combat during February was *Uffz.* Karl Sennewald of 5. *Staffel*, killed in combat with a Spitfire near Pont-du-Fahs on the 17th, but on the 23rd, *Oblt.* Wolf von Bülow, the *Kapitän* of 5./JG 2, was killed when Kairouan airfield was bombed. Although officially credited with a single victory, von Bülow is reputed to have actually shot down six aircraft in Tunisia.

II./JG 51 claimed only nine *Luftsiege* in February, six of which were attributed to the *Staffelkapitän*, *Lt.* Puschmann. It is presumed that 4. and 5. *Staffeln* had by this time been transferred to Sardinia in order to protect the fleets of transport aircraft ferrying urgently-needed supplies. Two pilots were lost near Cagliari: *Uffz.* Hans Pflüger of 4./JG 51, lost on 26th, who had been credited with at least two claims over Tunisia, and another pilot on the 28th. Two days later, *Uffz.* Wilhelm Schenk of 5./JG 51 was credited with accounting for the *Gruppe's* 1,300th *Luftsieg* but was himself shot down over the sea. He drowned, having neglected to wear his life jacket.

The '*Pik As*' *Geschwader* claimed 26 victories in February, of which, unlike on previous occasions, 11, or 43 per cent, were bombers. On 1 February, *Oblt.* Julius Meimberg, *Kapitän* of 11./JG 2 which, it will be remembered, was operating under the control of JG 53, destroyed a B-17 near Pont-du-Fahs but was himself shot down and severely burned, subsequently spending some time in hospital. After the departure of its leader, it seems that 11./JG 2 was disbanded and its members finally absorbed into JG 53 in order to reinforce its various *Staffeln*. On the same date, *Fw.* Erich Paczia, a pilot of 6./JG 53 credited with 16 victories, was killed, probably while engaging four-engined bombers. On the 24th, four

Marauders were claimed over the Gulf of Tunis but in return for their only limited success JG 53 lost five men killed and a sixth taken prisoner. It seems that the number of claims in February was low because parts of I. and II./JG 53 were, like II./JG 51, engaged in escort duties.

In Libya, the retreat of the German and Italian units continued. Rommel and the Italian generals attempted various delaying tactics but a deep thrust into the desert by the 2nd New Zealand Division threatened to outflank Axis positions and cut their supply lines. Once again the remnants of *Panzerarmee Afrika* evacuated their positions and fell back to Buerat on the coast of the Gulf of Sirte. This line was attacked and outflanked on the 15th and with a second Axis position breached on the 20th, Tripoli fell into Allied hands on the 23rd.

Meanwhile, JG 77 flew escort missions for Ju 87s and the ground-attack aircraft of I./Sch.G 2 as well as engaging enemy aircraft. Some indication of the intensity of the battles over the retreating ground troops may be gained from the fact that, in January, JG 77 claimed 100 victories and, by the end of the month, *Kommodore* Müncheberg had reached his 129th victory; *Hptm.* Bär, *Kommandeur* of II./JG 77, had 152; *Hptm.* 'Kuddel' Ubben, *Kommandeur* of III./JG 77, 102; *Obt.* Emil Omert, *Staffelkapitän* of 8./JG 77, 58, and *Fw.* Ernst-Wilhelm Reinert of 4./JG 77, 114. In the same period the *Geschwader* lost four pilots killed in action and two taken prisoner. Two of the casualties were new pilots who had just arrived with the unit, but *Fw.* Heinz Furth, listed missing on the 13th, was one of the oldest members of 7./JG 77 and had flown fighter-bombers in the Aegean in 1941. He was credited with three victories. *Uffz.* Hans Hempfling, killed on the 14th, had joined 3./JG 77 in mid-1942 and had also destroyed three aircraft, and *Obt.* Ludwig Theopold, who had taken over from *Hptm.* Huy as *Staffelführer* of 7./JG 77 two months earlier, was killed in a collision at Matmata on the 26th. Another casualty, but not the result of combat, was *Lt.* Lutz-Wilhelm Burkhardt, *Staffelkapitän* of 4./JG 77, who was strolling around the airfield at Zarzur on 7 January, the day he claimed his 54th victory, when he stepped on a mine and received serious foot injuries. It was another seven months before he returned to his unit.

On 26 January, four days after JG 77 had left Castel Benito airfield, it was ordered to help defend the Mareth Line, a fortified defensive line just inside the Tunisian border with Libya. On 4 February *Hptm.* Heinz Bär shot down two B-17s over I./JG 77's airfield at Matmata, so reaching 154 victories, and the same day III./JG 77 claimed four P-38s. Another personality who, like 'Toni' Hafner of II./JG 51 mentioned earlier, had to leave the theatre prematurely, was *Hptm.* 'Toni' Hackl, *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 77 with 124 *Luftsiege*, who was wounded on the 4th while attacking Flying Fortresses. He was replaced by *Lt.* Franz Hrdlicka. On the 8th, I./JG 77 claimed six B-25s and two P-38s which were attacking Gabes airfield, and on the 26th, claimed nine P-40s while pilots of II./JG 77 claimed ten more and III./JG 77 an additional five.

Meanwhile, as the Allied advance from Tripoli was so slow as to pose no immediate threat to Rommel's troops, now safely behind the Mareth Line, the Axis Supreme command in North Africa accepted Rommel's proposal that a determined assault should be made on the Allied First Army to relieve pressure on Tunisia and, if possible, to push on to Constantine and the coastal town of Bône. Designated Operation 'Frühlingswind' ('Spring Breeze') for the 5. *Panzerarmee* and Operation 'Morgenluft' ('Morning Air') for Rommel's *Panzerarmee Afrika*, the operations opened on the 14th and 15 February respectively and, as JG 77 was already escorting Ju 87s in the Gafsa area and was so close to the Tunisian-Algerian border, the *Geschwader* became involved in the offensive.

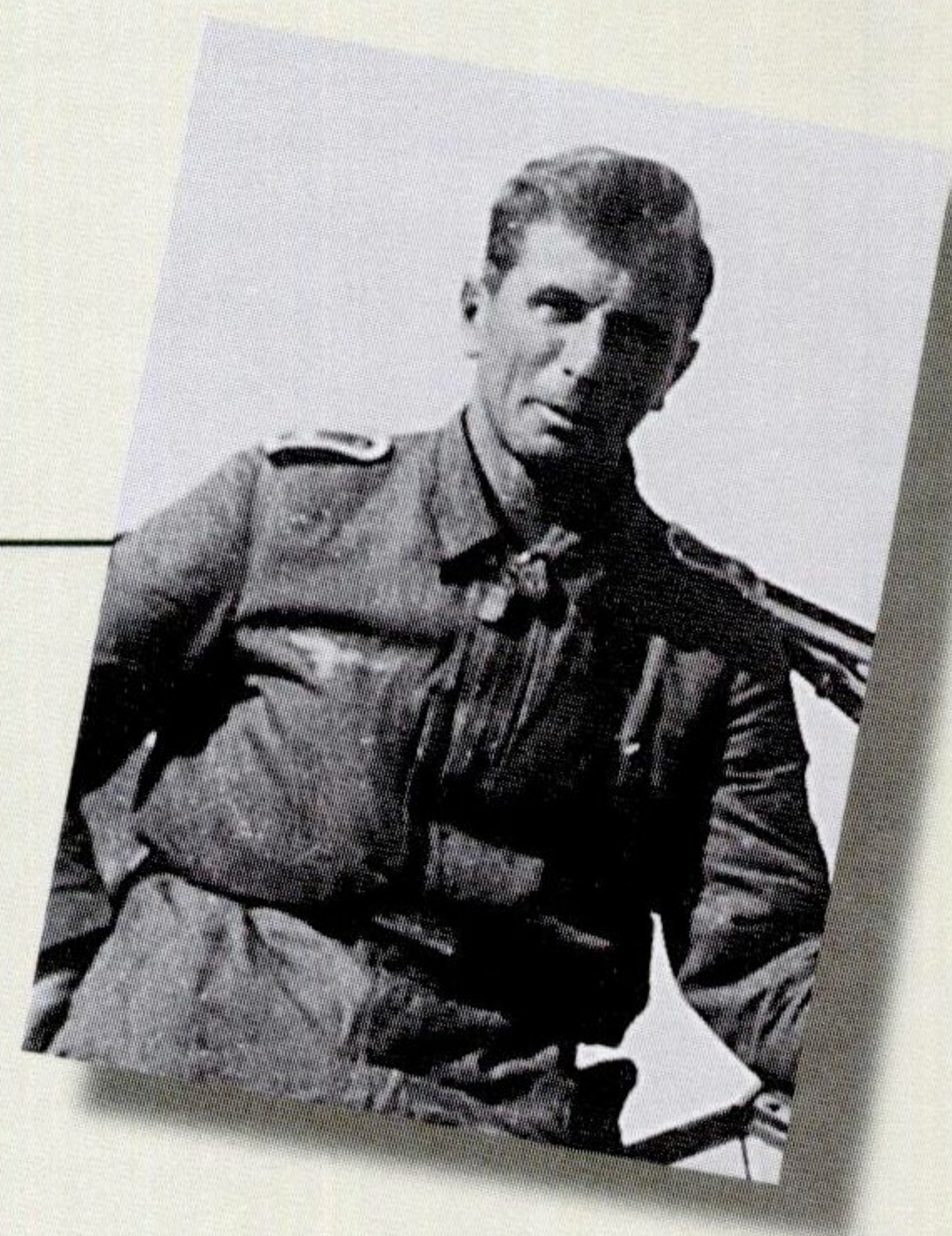
BELOW AND
BELOW RIGHT:
Luftwaffe
personnel and local
labour clearing the
debris after a
bombing attack on
an airfield in
Tunisia in February
1943. The aircraft
shown is 'White 4',
a Bf 109 G-2 flown
by *Obt.* Fritz
Dinger of 4./JG 53
and is finished in
the standard
European colours
74, 75 and 76.



“I was firmly convinced that the B-17 was a most formidable adversary...”

JOHANN PICHLER, 7./JG 77

Early in the afternoon of 18 January 1943, 12 B-17 Flying Fortresses, escorted by a large number of P-38s, carried out a strike on Castel Benito airfield where about 200 aircraft of the Luftwaffe and Regio Aeronautica were parked. Shortly before 14.00 hrs, some 20 Bf 109s from III./JG 77 were scrambled to intercept the bombers, but before the Messerschmitts were able to manoeuvre into the best tactical position and close to firing range, they were attacked by the escort of P-38 Lightnings. Here, Ofw. Johann Pichler describes how he shot down a B-17, the first of 14 four-engined bombers eventually included in his victory total.



I was just using my spade to dig a hole in the desert in order to empty my bowels when the alert sounded. I immediately ran back to my machine, but about 20 Bf 109s had already taken off to intercept the bombers. Once airborne, I hastened to rejoin them but they were no longer to be seen. I therefore sped away and made contact with the four-engined bombers alone. They were B-17 Flying Fortresses, but my comrades had been intercepted by the bombers' P-38 fighter escort and, in a fight about 2,000 metres above the bombers, were prevented from attacking them. The B-17s had already bombed Tripoli and were flying away in a south-westerly direction at an altitude of 4,500 metres.

Fully aware of the B-17s' defensive armament, especially its enhanced effect when they flew in close formation, I quickly decided to attack the last section of three bombers. I made two passes, firing short bursts of cannon and machine-gun fire into two B-17s while dozens of 0.5 calibre machine guns fired back at me, but luckily I was hit only twice without serious consequences. After breaking away from my second pass, I noticed that my cannon shells had obviously struck home as one bomber had started smoking and had begun to lag behind the formation. I was going in from the rear for a third firing pass and closing to firing range, hoping to finish it off, when I was suddenly fired at from above by four Lightnings which had seen my lone attack. From an altitude of about 4,000 metres, I put my aircraft into a steep plunging dive down to the ground and then eased out to escape by hugging the contours of the landscape. While doing so, I caught sight of a pyramid-shaped feature close to the Matmata mountains and, hoping that it would save me, I curved around it as tightly as possible. The four 'Amis' on my tail soon realised that they could not easily catch me, so they left me and I was able to fly home.

The crew of the B-17 I had attacked was seen to bale out and the unmanned bomber continued its flight for a short time before plunging to earth as my 31st victory. From that day I was firmly convinced that the B-17 was a very formidable adversary with a most powerful defensive armament. The P-38 Lightning was also growing in my esteem.

As a result of my victory over the B-17, I clashed with my *Gruppenkommandeur* on how best to fight these monsters. I had quickly discovered that the relatively light armament of my Bf 109 G-2 – one 20 mm cannon and two 7.9 mm machine-guns – was inadequate to seriously threaten such a heavyweight. Fitting a 2 cm gondola weapon under each wing was not an entirely satisfactory solution for, while quite effective, the gondola weapons resulted in more weight and adversely affected the flying characteristics when we had to combat escort fighters. Even then it was possible to put burst after burst into a B-17 until all ammunition was exhausted, and still it would not go down. Then I made the mistake of remarking that if I had a Lightning, I'd knock down bunches of B-17s! I shouldn't have made such a thoughtless and rash remark, for my derogatory comments only annoyed my commander and he even threatened me with a court-martial. But the point was that I was very impressed with the concentrated armament in the P-38's nose, and in my estimation the P-38 was more manoeuvrable and somewhat faster than our G-2s, especially when the latter were equipped with the two underwing gondola weapons. I had never been keen on dog-fighting the P-38, but I did manage to shoot down four of them and, as I had discovered, an excellent method of breaking off combat was to go into a power dive from high altitude. The P-38 pilots rarely followed us. At first we could not understand this, but the mystery was explained a few months later when captured P-38 pilots told us that in a dive their aircraft became too fast to be pulled out safely.

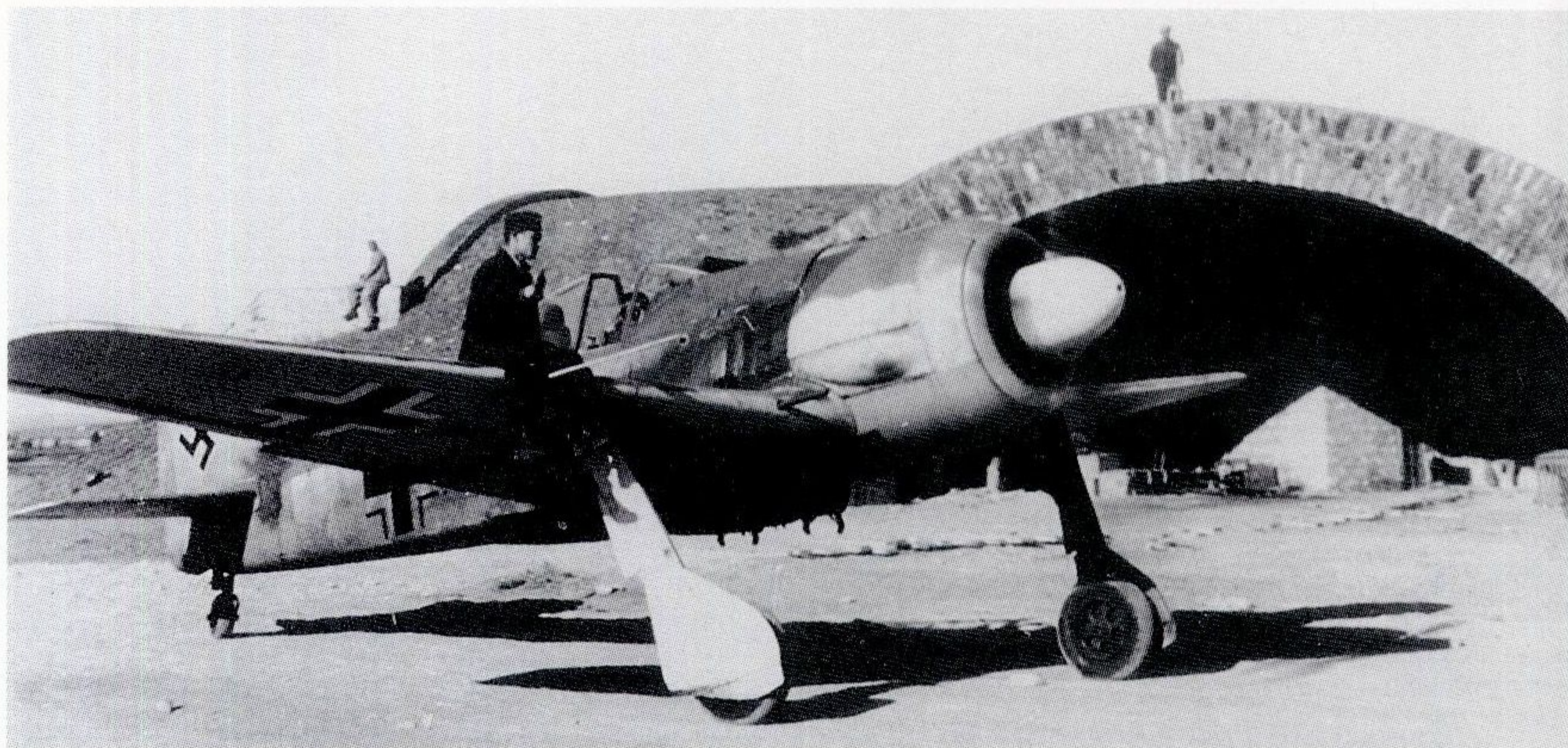
February was marked by the famous battles at Sidi Bou Zid, El Guettar, Kasserine Pass, Thala and Sbiba, in which the experienced German tank crews and infantry proved qualitatively superior to the many inexperienced US troops and the under-equipped French units. These battles were altogether different from the desert engagements which had covered enormous spaces of sand and consisted usually of a series of small encounters seeming to have little connection. Now the landscape consisted of green hills and mountains and the ground fighting was concentrated in the mountain valleys, mostly narrow, through which the Allies endeavoured to advance.

But a major flaw in the Axis planning was that neither Rommel nor von Arnim had overall command, so that co-ordination between them was difficult and the efficiency of the counter-offensives was adversely affected. After 'Frühlingswind', von Arnim launched another offensive, Operation 'Ochsenkopf' ('Bull's Head'), at Medenine in the south, but this proved unsuccessful and Axis troops experienced some losses.

By the end of February the pilots of JG 77, which had been operating on the fronts to the east and the west as circumstances required, had claimed 77 victories in the month, Fw. Reinert reaching 124 *Luftsiege*,

Oblt. Omert 60 and *Hptm.* Bär 161, in return for four pilots killed and four others taken prisoner. A significant loss on the 26th was that of *Ofw.* Robert Helmer of 8./JG 77 who is believed to have originally served with II./Tr.Gr.186. With 26 victories in Russia and eight in Africa, Helmer was posthumously awarded the German Cross in Gold.

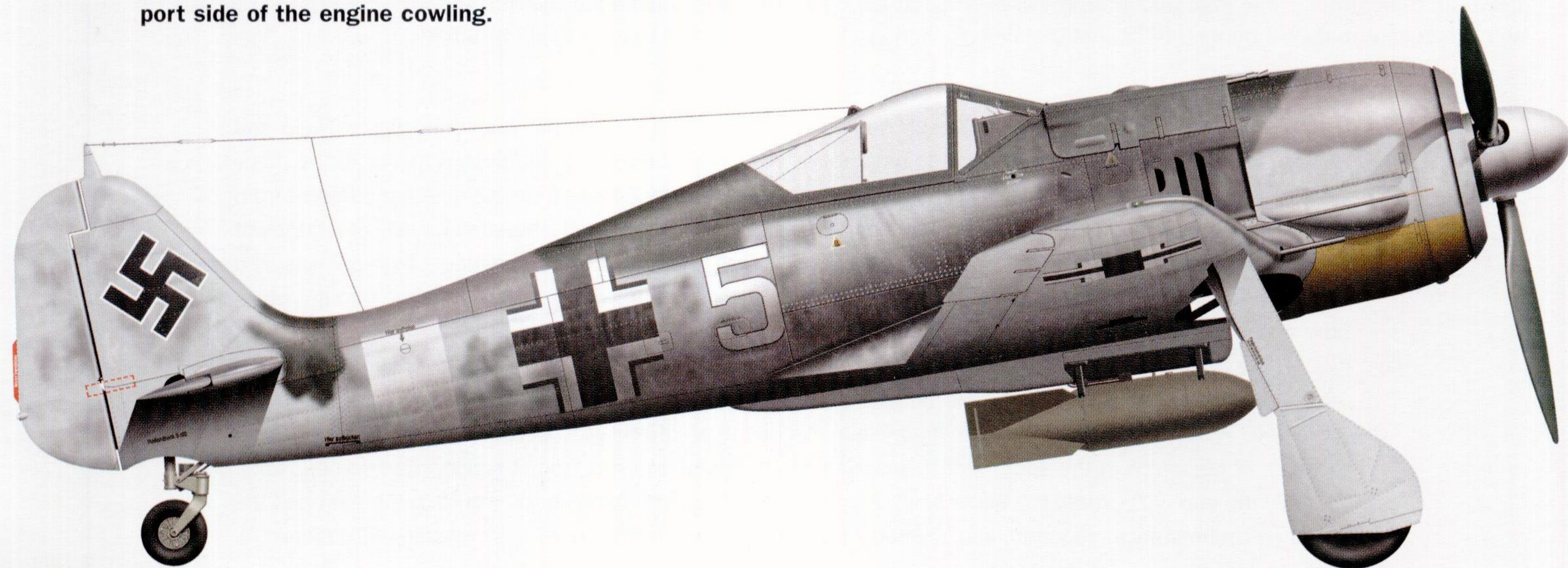
One incident which occurred at this time involved *Oblt.* Werner Schroer, *Staffelkapitän* of 8./JG 27, still stationed with the rest of III./JG 27, on the island of Crete, where the situation was so quiet that in three months he had claimed only two *Luftsiege*. Taking advantage of this relatively peaceful period, Schroer decided to return to Germany in order to get married. After stopping off at Rhodes, Schroer took off again, the fuselage of his Bf 109 G loaded with his personal baggage and a set of beautiful porcelain tableware which was a wedding gift from his comrades. Schroer soon observed two Beaufighters, or Beauforts, flying below him and, diving down onto them, he shot down both aircraft. When he landed on the Greek mainland, however, he found that his set of tableware had been broken into thousands of pieces.



ABOVE RIGHT AND RIGHT: With a member of the ground staff seated on the wing to guide the pilot, this Fw 190 A-4 of 9./SKG 10 coded 'White 5' was photographed as it taxied past the airfield's French-built hangars at Bizerta/Sidi Ahmed in January 1943. The demands made on III./SKG 10 at this time varied greatly and involved attacks against shipping as well as ground-attack missions. As the European grey camouflage colours were more suitable for flights over the sea, it is believed that this aircraft therefore retained its 74/75/76 colouring and Fw 190s in Tunisia may have continued to do so even when the situation later demanded that most missions were carried out in direct support of ground troops. At the beginning of 1943, the Fw 190 was still able to hold its own and the enemy, who chiefly used Spitfires, treated it with a certain respect. The Gruppe therefore carried out many ground-attack operations with good results but was also sometimes employed in the pure fighter role when they helped to defend targets against bomber attacks, and at least seven pilots each claimed a Spitfire in Tunisia.

Focke-Wulf Fw 190 A-4 'White 5' of 9./SKG 10, Bizerta/Sidi Ahmed, January 1943

For the reasons explained in the photograph caption to the accompanying photographs, this aircraft is shown in the standard European camouflage of RLM 74, 75 and 76. As was also standard, the panel under the nose was yellow and the aircraft had an all-white spinner and rear fuselage band. The top of the latter, however, was overpainted to aid concealment of the aircraft when viewed from above and similar newly painted areas appeared on the rear fuselage and engine cowling. The fuselage sides were heavily discoloured by exhaust stains resulting from frequent periods of flying at full power. It is not known whether this aircraft carried the shield emblem of III./SKG 10 on the port side of the engine cowling.



BELOW: III./SKG 10 was formed in December 1942 by redesignating III./ZG 2. Here, a member of the ground staff is guiding a bombed-up Fw 190 of III./SKG 10 from its dispersal.



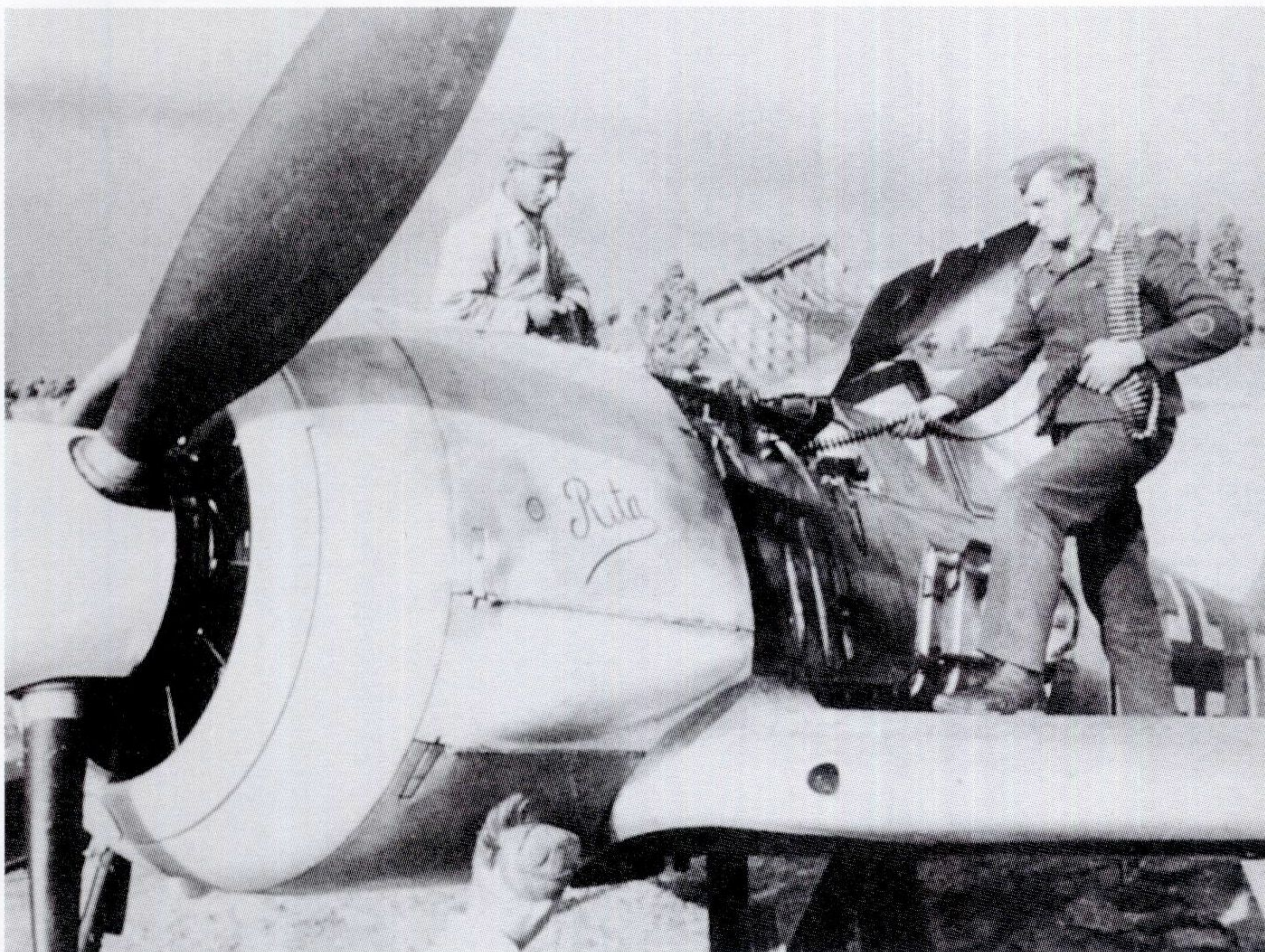
RIGHT: Another unidentified Fw 190 in North Africa, this example having external sand guards fitted to the air filter. On untropicalised aircraft, the air filters were concealed under blisters on the engine cowling.



ABOVE AND RIGHT: Two photographs showing ground crew checking over an Fw 190 A-4 of III./SKG 10 prior to another sortie. The aircraft has already been loaded with an SC 250 bomb and there are a number of oil streaks on the engine cowling. Also visible on the port wing is the small rod close to the undercarriage attachment point which indicated to the pilot whether the undercarriage was retracted or extended. Although it has been suggested that the background colour of the shield emblem may have been red or, alternatively, varied according to the particular Staffel, comparison with the red area on the headrest warning notice and the red stripe across the extended footstep would strongly suggest that on this machine at least, the background was dark blue. This aircraft does not appear to have the usual yellow panel under the nose.



FAR LEFT AND LEFT: Another Fw 190 A-4 of III./SKG 10 photographed as it taxis out for a sortie. Barely visible on the fuselage is what appears to be part of a Stab marking, possibly the double chevron of the Kommandeur, indicating that this aircraft was allocated to Oblt. Fritz Schröter, seen (*LEFT*) at the Gruppe's battle headquarters at Bizerta. Schröter, who had earlier led 10.(Jabo)/JG 2, received his Ritterkreuz in September 1942, mainly on account of his successful daylight Jabo attacks against Southern England.



LEFT: Armourers working on an Fw 190 A-4 which has had the name 'Rita' painted on the engine cowling. This aircraft is believed to have been coded 'Black 1' and although the unit to which it belonged is not known, the lack of a bomb rack would suggest II./JG 2 rather than a ground-attack unit. Of interest is the overall pale appearance of the engine area which is much more lightly mottled than the fuselage. The pale vertical line apparently aft of the fuselage cross is the undercarriage position indicator projecting from the upper surface of the wing. This aircraft clearly has a yellow panel on the underside of the cowling but does not appear to have a white band on the rear fuselage.

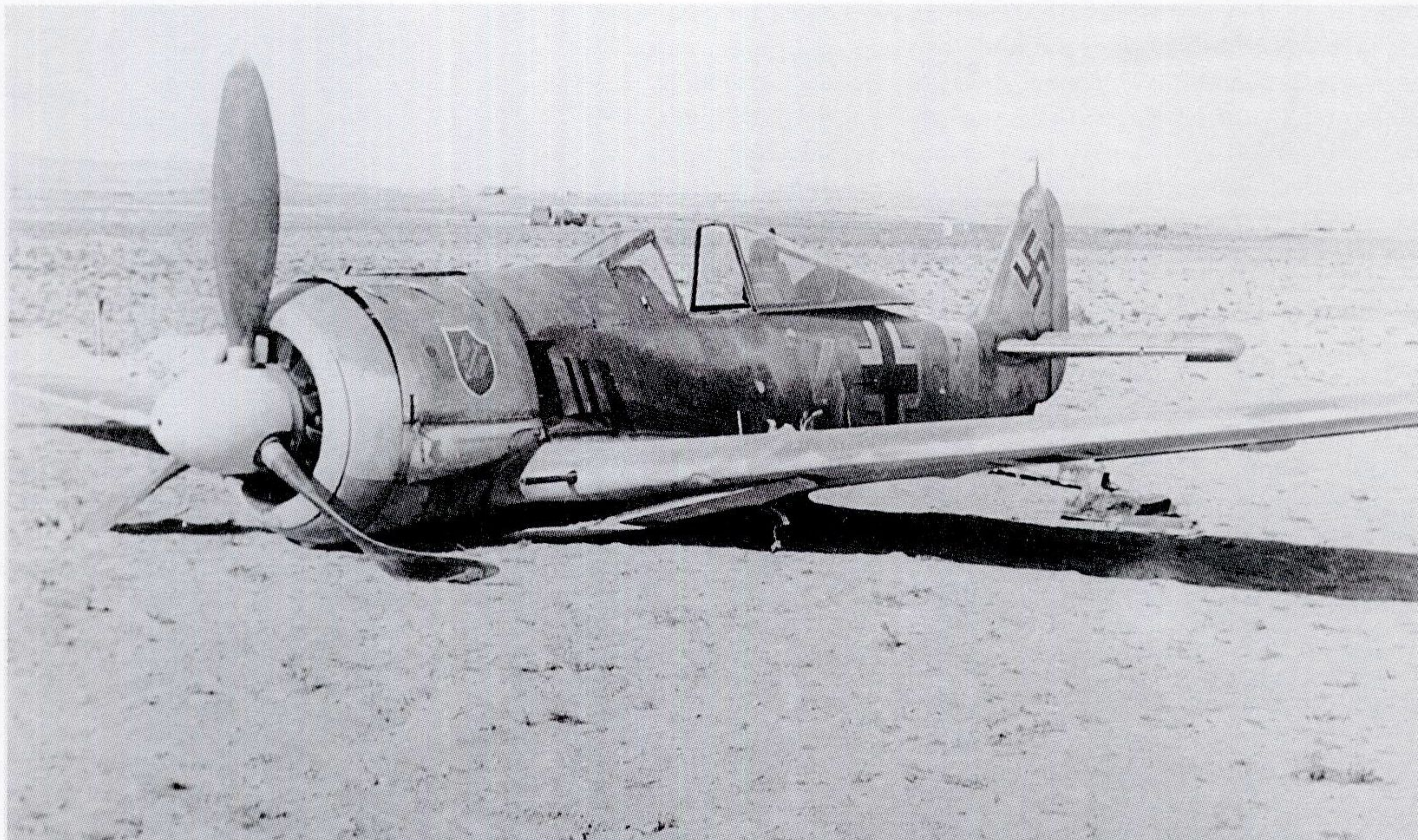


Focke-Wulf Fw 190 A-4 'Yellow 4' of III./SKG 10, Tunisia 1943

Camouflaged in a European scheme of RLM 74, 75 and 76, this Fw 190 fighter-bomber had a yellow panel under the nose and a white spinner and white fuselage band. In at least two Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Reports concerning pilots from the same Gruppe, the unit emblem is described as shown here with a blue shield outlined in yellow with a white diagonal arrow. The W.Nr. shown on the profile is based on the notes given in the caption to the accompanying photograph.

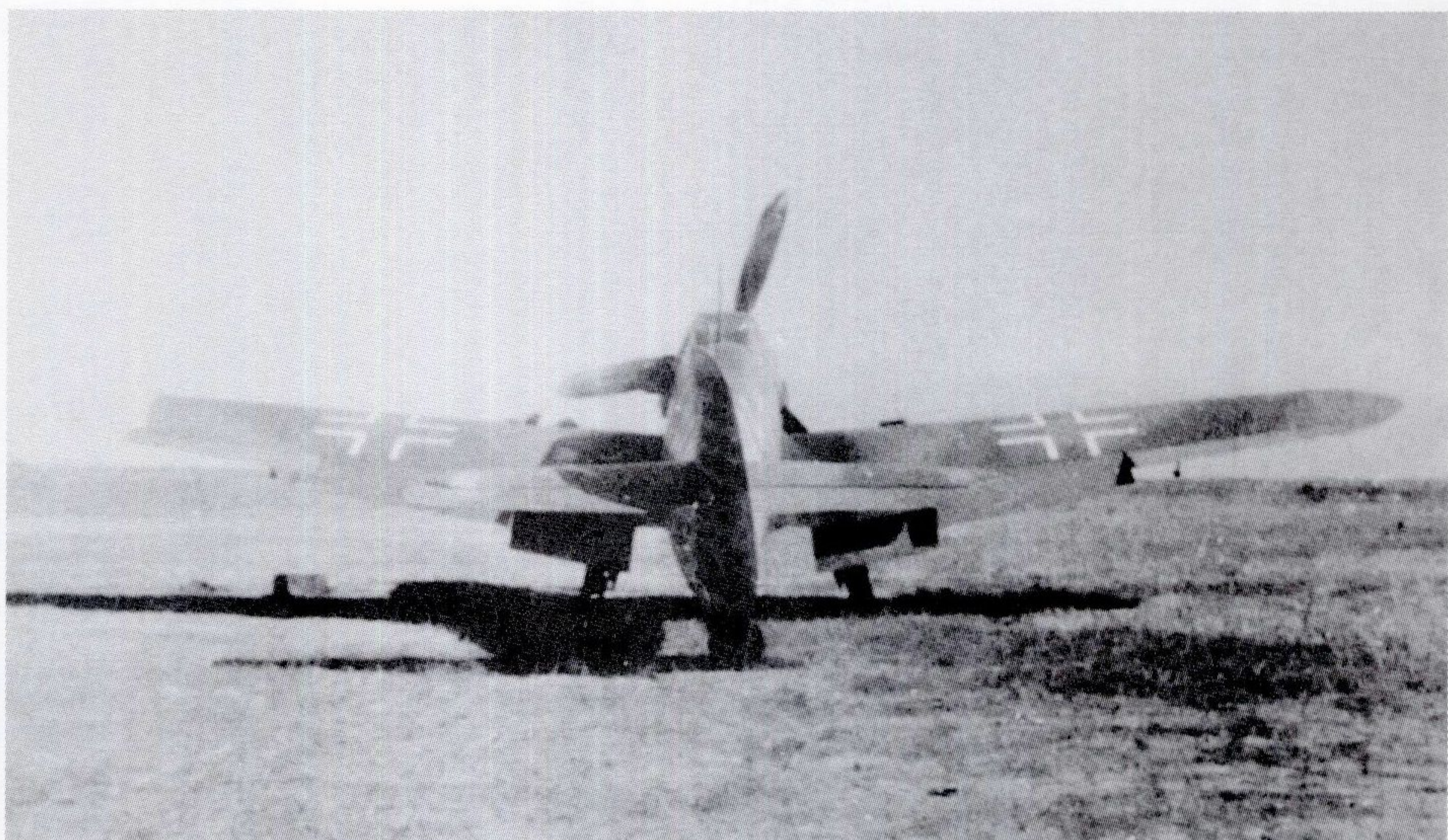


Badge of III./SKG 10. The winged arrow on the shield is based on the design featured in the centre of several versions of the Frontflugspange.



LEFT: 'Yellow 4', an Fw 190 A-4 of III./SKG 10 which crash-landed in early 1943. Although not yet confirmed, it is possible that this aircraft is W.Nr. 2317 which was being flown by Fw. Ludwig Seif of 11./SKG 10 on 2 February 1943 when it was hit by anti-aircraft fire and crash-landed near Ferryville. German records state that W.Nr. 2317 was 40 per cent damaged which would seem to correspond to the photograph.

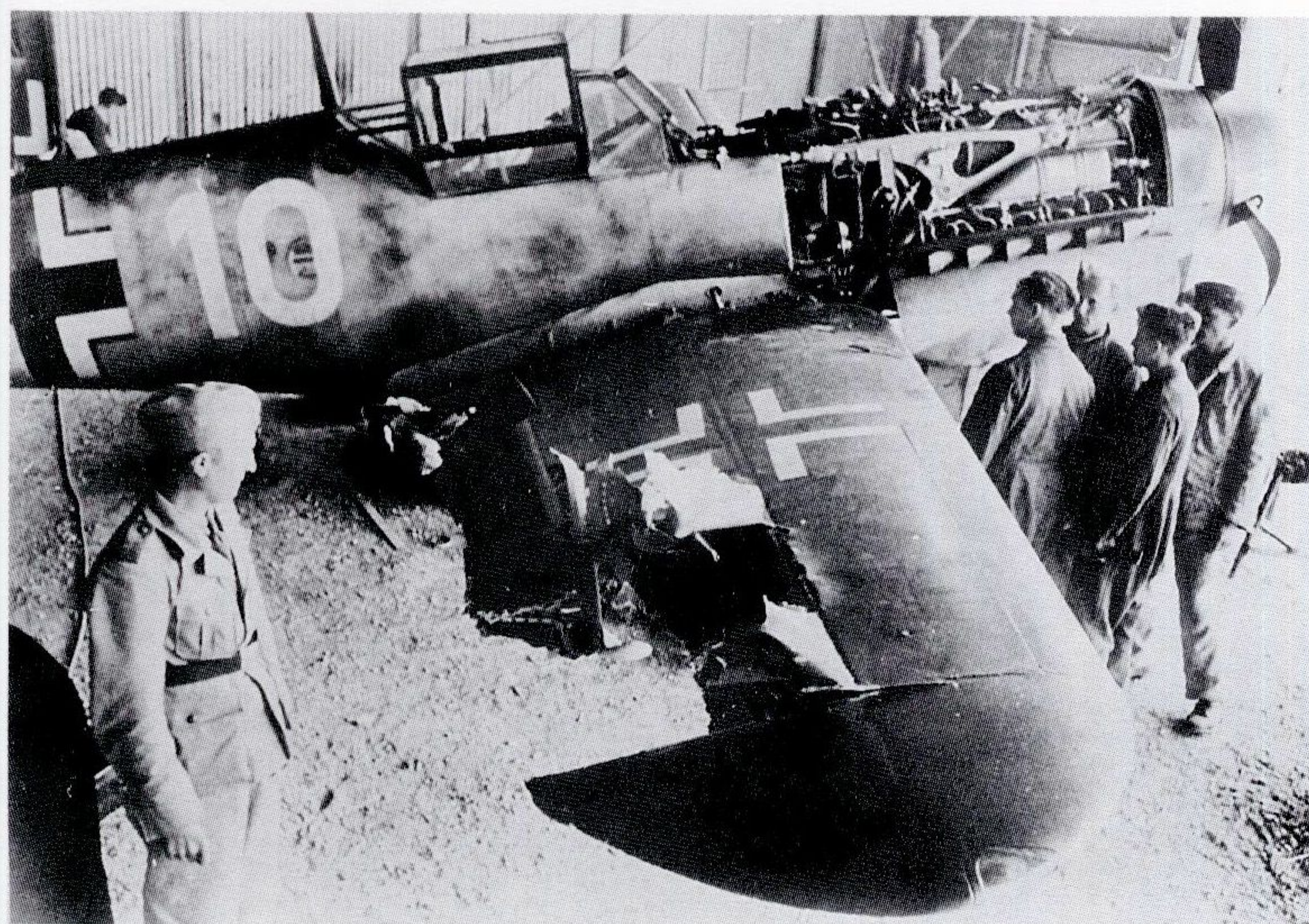
RIGHT: Not all of JG 53's aircraft were camouflaged in tropical colours, as is evident in this useful view of this aircraft in Sicily which has retained its 74/75/76 European scheme. Note that the upper wing Balkenkreuze consist only of the outer white outlines.



BELOW: On 15 October 1942, Lt. Fritz Dinger was appointed Staffelführer of 4./JG 53. He claimed his 49th victory on 2 November and was awarded the Ritterkreuz on 23 December. He is seen here as an Oberleutnant, probably in early 1943, when his tally totalled 53 victories.



RIGHT: These aircraft of JG 53 in Sicily have their uppersurfaces in an overall Sandgelb 79 but although white theatre markings have been applied to some areas of the airframe, the spinners remains dark green.

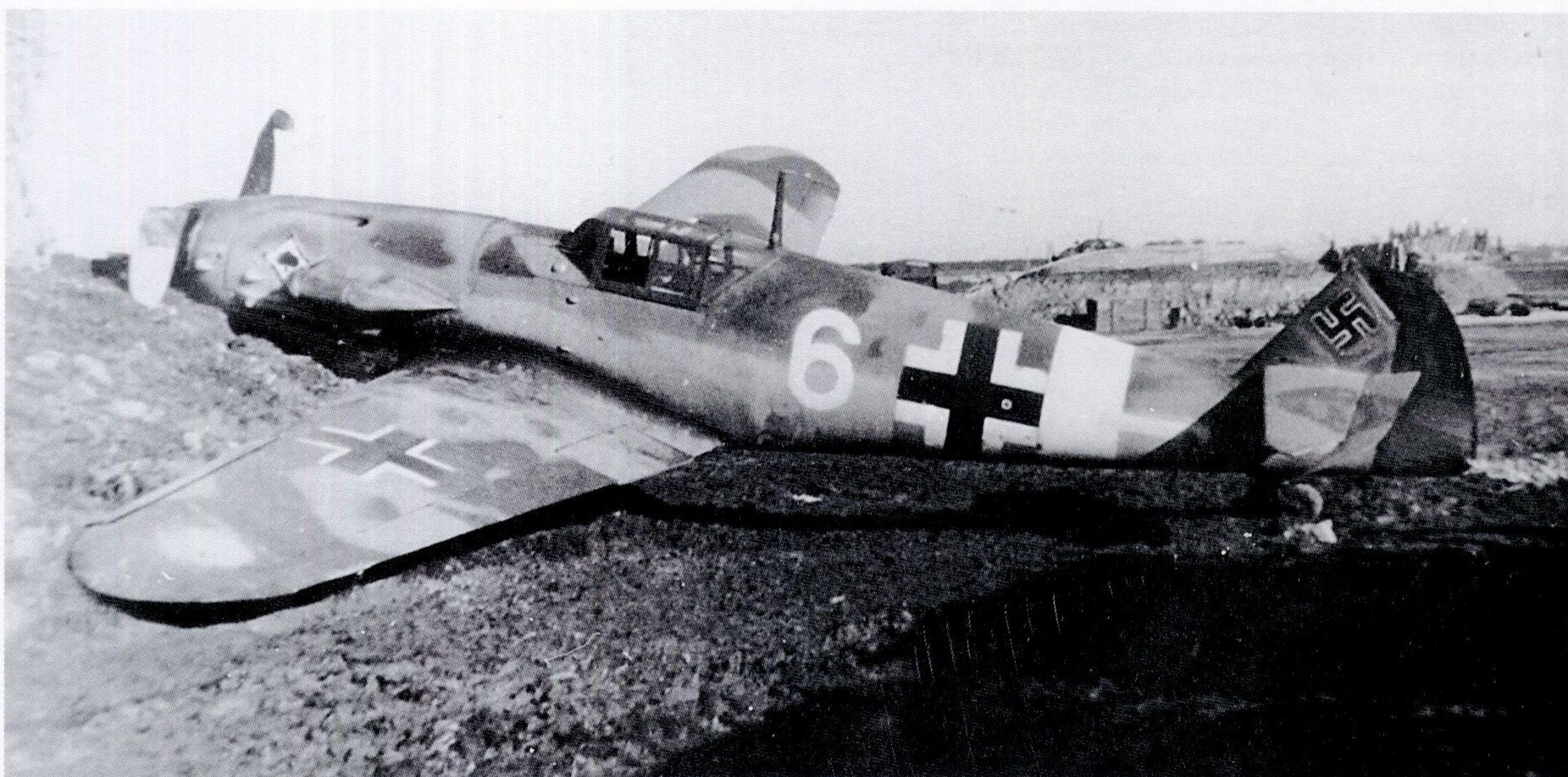


ABOVE: Note again the outline style wing cross on another of JG 53's aircraft, this example having been damaged by anti-aircraft fire over Malta.

BELOW: The 'Pik As' badge and the vertical Gruppe bar on the rear fuselage of these Bf 109 G-2 troops identifies them as belonging to III./JG 53. All aircraft have white spinners, a yellow panel under the nose, and a camouflage scheme consisting of Sandgelb 79 with green patches, probably RLM 80, on the uppersurfaces and 78 on the undersurfaces.



RIGHT: 'Yellow 6', a Bf 109 G-2 trop of 6./JG 53, after a taxiing accident on Sicily in early 1943. On the original photograph it is possible to see what may have been an earlier grey splinter scheme of 74 and 75 remaining on those areas of the wings which were not overpainted, however unlikely this may seem in view of the complete overpainting of the fuselage. The spinner was probably entirely Green 70, as also seen in on the machine shown in the photograph below left.

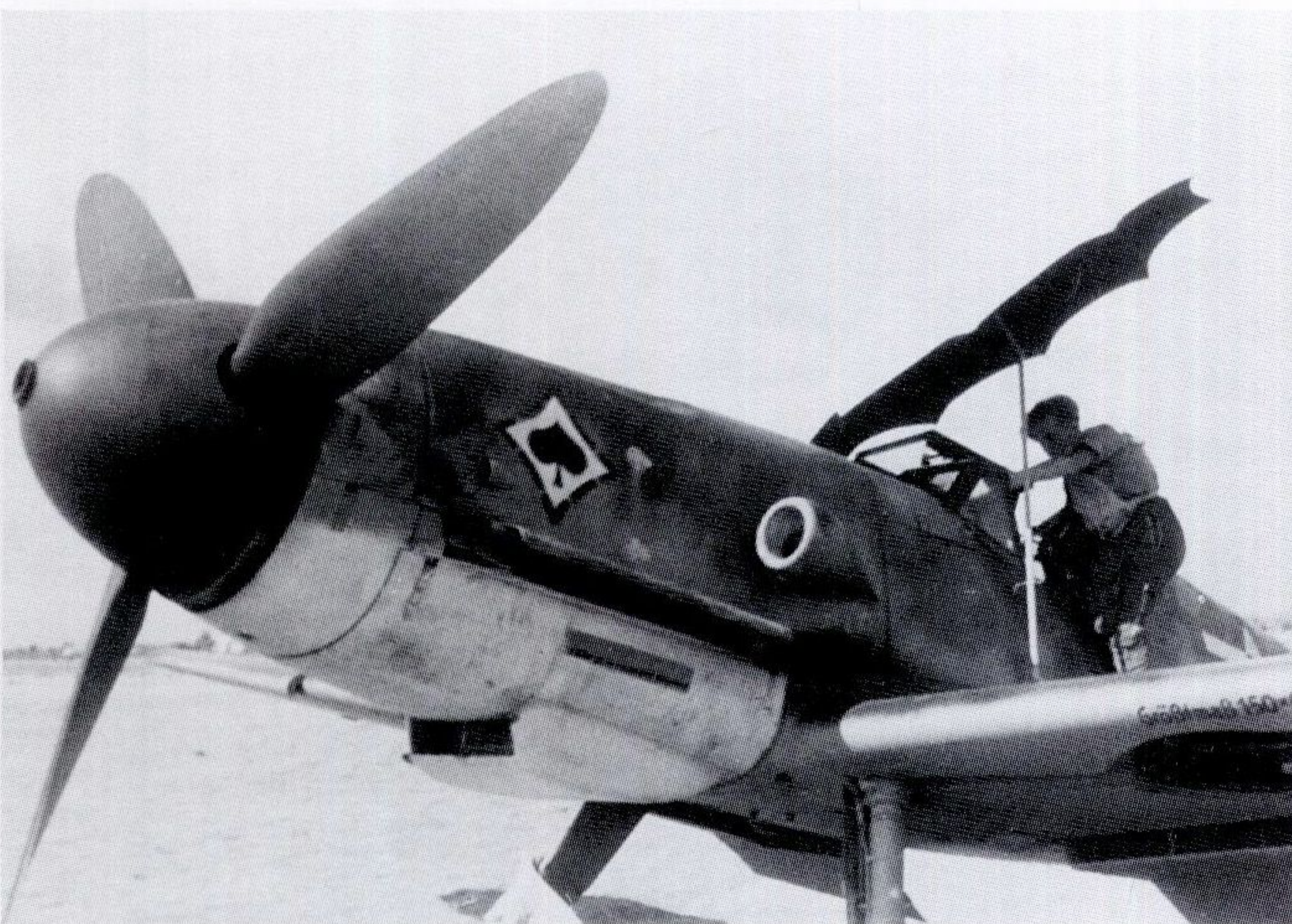


Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-2 trop 'Yellow 6' of 6./JG 53, Sicily, early 1943

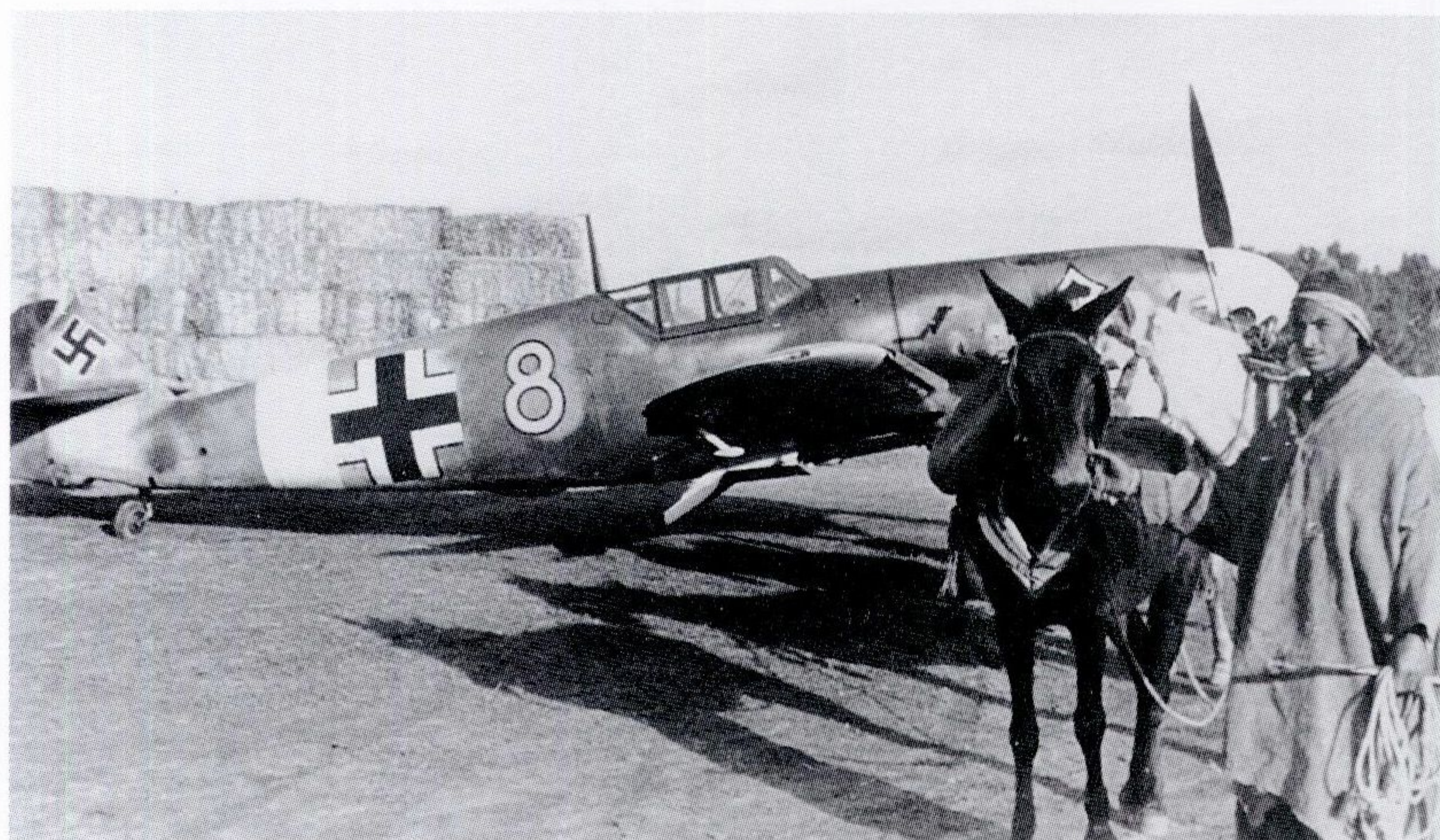
This aircraft is believed to have been finished in a 78/79 scheme with green RLM 80 mottles and segments as shown in the profile and photograph. The code number and II. Gruppe bar were in yellow, as was the panel under the nose, and the spinner is believed to have been Green 70 with no white area. It is possible that the wings, although overpainted, may have retained traces of their earlier RLM 74 and 75 colours.

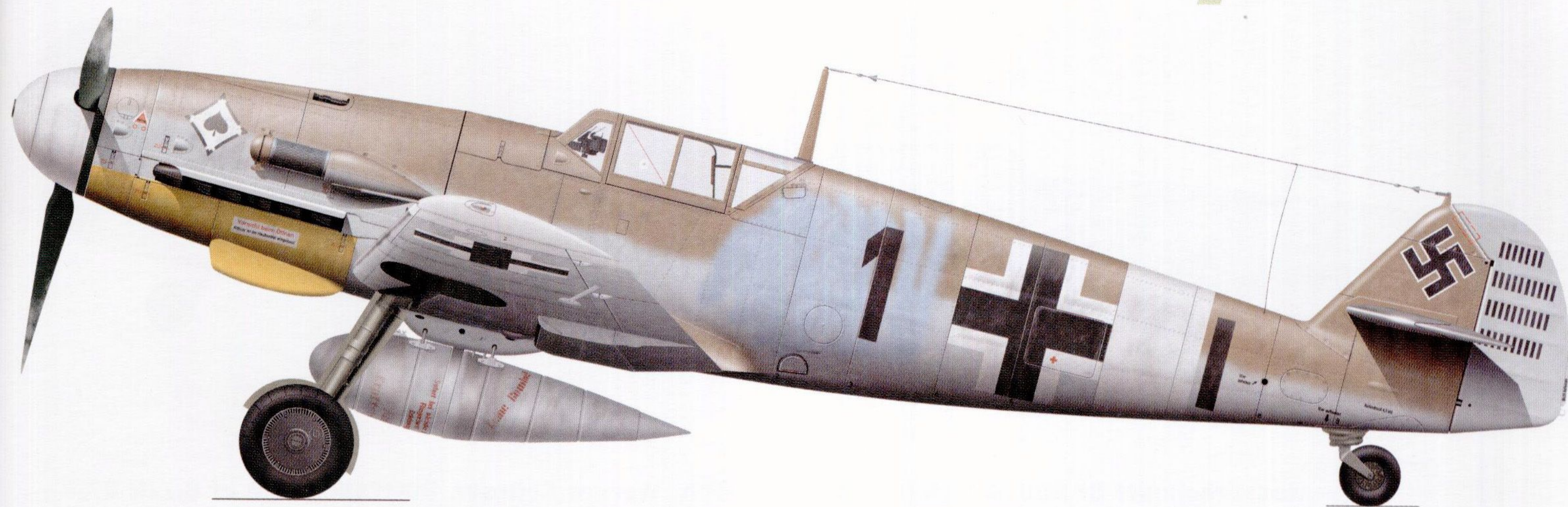


BELOW: The small, light coloured patches just visible behind the 'Pik As' badge on this Bf 109 G of JG 53 show where the sand filter has been removed. The small blisters below the cockpit are the attachment points for a sunshade.



BELOW: 'Yellow 8' was one of the few Bf 109 G-1s employed by JG 53, this particular example serving with 3. Staffel in Tunisia at the end of 1942. It is possible that this aircraft was one of the machines previously assigned to the high-altitude Staffel 11./JG 2 which, until February 1943, was attached to JG 53. Certainly the code number on the fuselage has been changed.





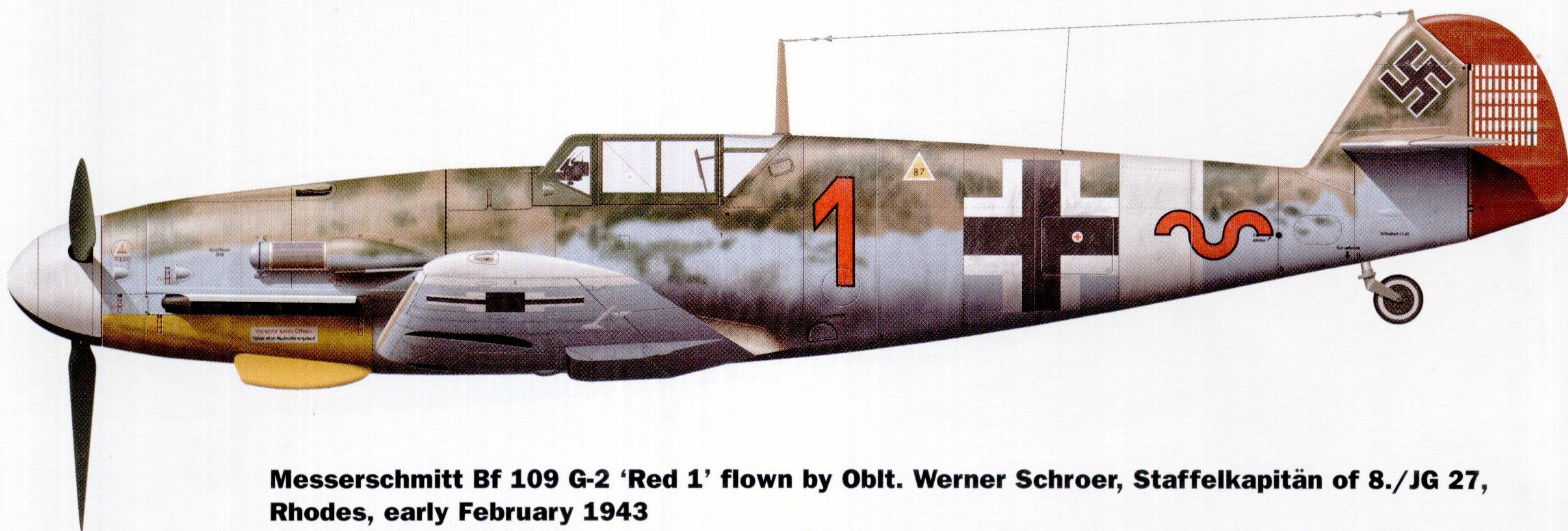
Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-4 trop 'Black 1' flown by Oblt. Franz Schiess of 8./JG 53, February 1943

This aircraft is believed to have been finished in a standard mid-demarcation RLM 78/79 scheme with a repainted area on the fuselage where the aircraft's identity number has been changed. Standard theatre markings comprised a yellow panel under the nose and a white spinner and rear fuselage band. A total of 37 black victory bars appeared on the rudder, and the 'Pik As' badge of JG 53 appeared on the cowling.

RIGHT:
This Bf 109 G-4 trop was flown by Oblt. Franz Schiess when Staffelführer of 8./JG 53 in February 1943. As there is no evidence around the swastika of an earlier scheme, the basic camouflage on this aircraft is probably still the original 74/75/76 finish although the fuselage at least appears to have received a random overspray of Sandgelb.

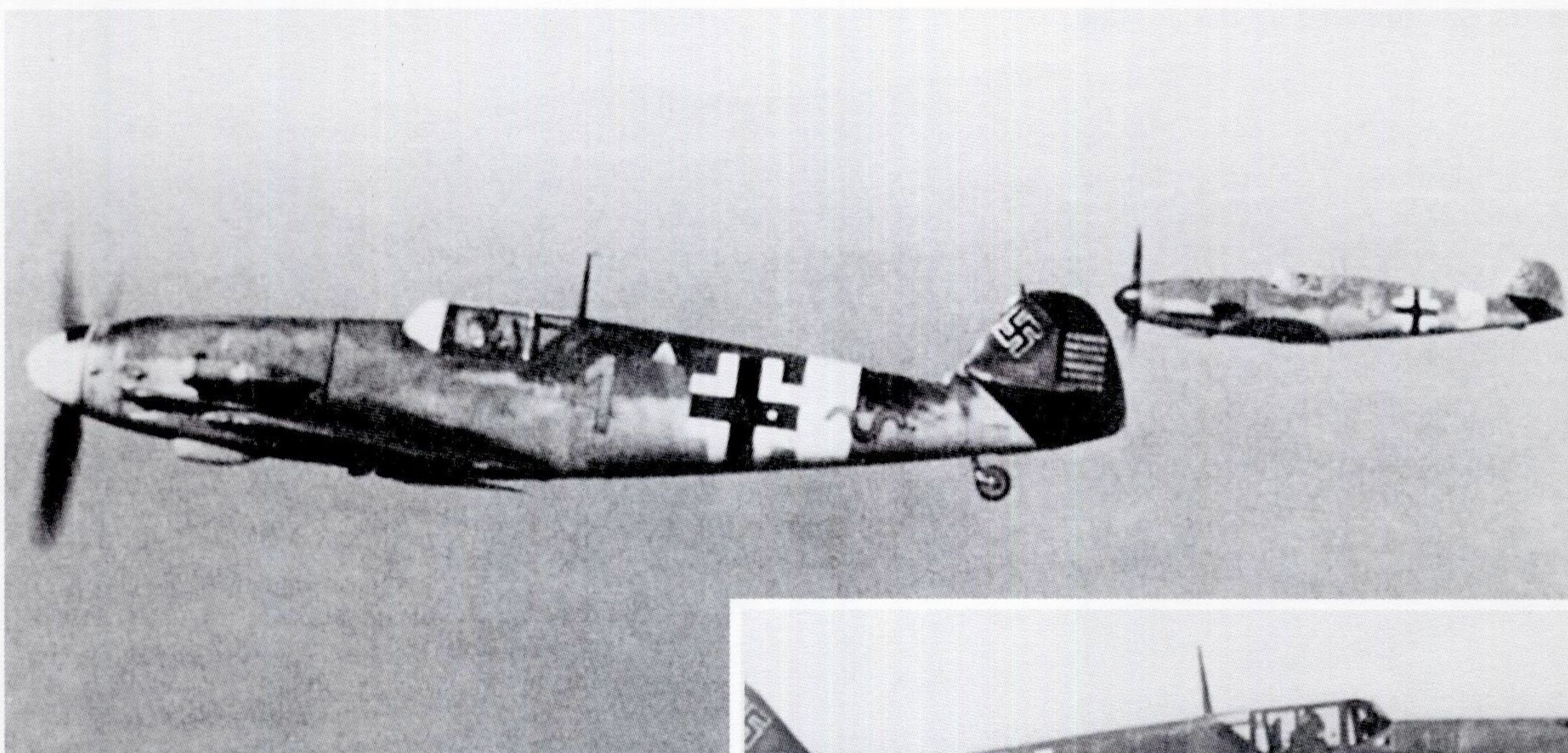


LEFT: This Bf 109 F-4 trop, photographed on Crete at the beginning of 1943, had quite an interesting history. It once served with 10. and 9./JG 53, and while operating with the 9. Staffel against Malta, was damaged in a landing accident at Comiso, Sicily. After repairs, the aircraft received an 'F' suffix to its W.Nr. 7510, indicating that although once damaged it had been declared 'Flugklar', or airworthy. The machine is then thought to have flown with III./JG 27 and in this photograph, perhaps following further damage, the aircraft has been fitted with a replacement wing from another aircraft, both the camouflage scheme and the style of wing Balkenkreuz being different from the rest of the airframe. Note also the unusual presentation of the fuselage Balkenkreuz. Shortly after this photograph was taken, the machine was transferred to Jagdgruppe West and was further damaged on 30 June 1943.



Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-2 'Red 1' flown by Oblt. Werner Schroer, Staffelkapitän of 8./JG 27, Rhodes, early February 1943

This aircraft was finished in a mid-demarcation 78/79 tropical scheme oversprayed with random green patches and had a yellow panel under the engine cowling. The wingtips and fuselage band were white and the predominantly Green 70 spinner had a white segment. Schroer's victory tally appeared only on the left side of the rudder and comprised 60 victory bars.



LEFT AND BELOW: For a short time in February 1943, 8./JG 27 was based on the airfield at Maritsa on the Greek island of Rhodes. These photographs show 'Red 1', a Bf 109 G-2 flown by the Staffelkapitän, Oblt. Werner Schroer, in formation with a Bf 109 F-4 'Red 5' over the Aegean Sea. Note that the position of the '1' differs on each side of the aircraft and on the starboard side is much closer to the Balkenkreuz. Interestingly, the tailwheel on 'Red 5' is retracted, while that on Schroer's machine has been locked in the down position.



FAR LEFT AND LEFT: Oblt. Schroer in the cockpit of his Bf 109 G-2. Unlike the E and F-series which often had a bullet-proof shield bolted to the front of the windscreen, most aircraft of the G-series had the shield incorporated into the welded framing and positioned a few millimetres behind the Plexiglas windscreen. To keep the space between them clear of condensation, a circular silica gel container, visible at the bottom left of the windscreen, was fitted between the shield and the Plexiglas windscreen to absorb moisture.

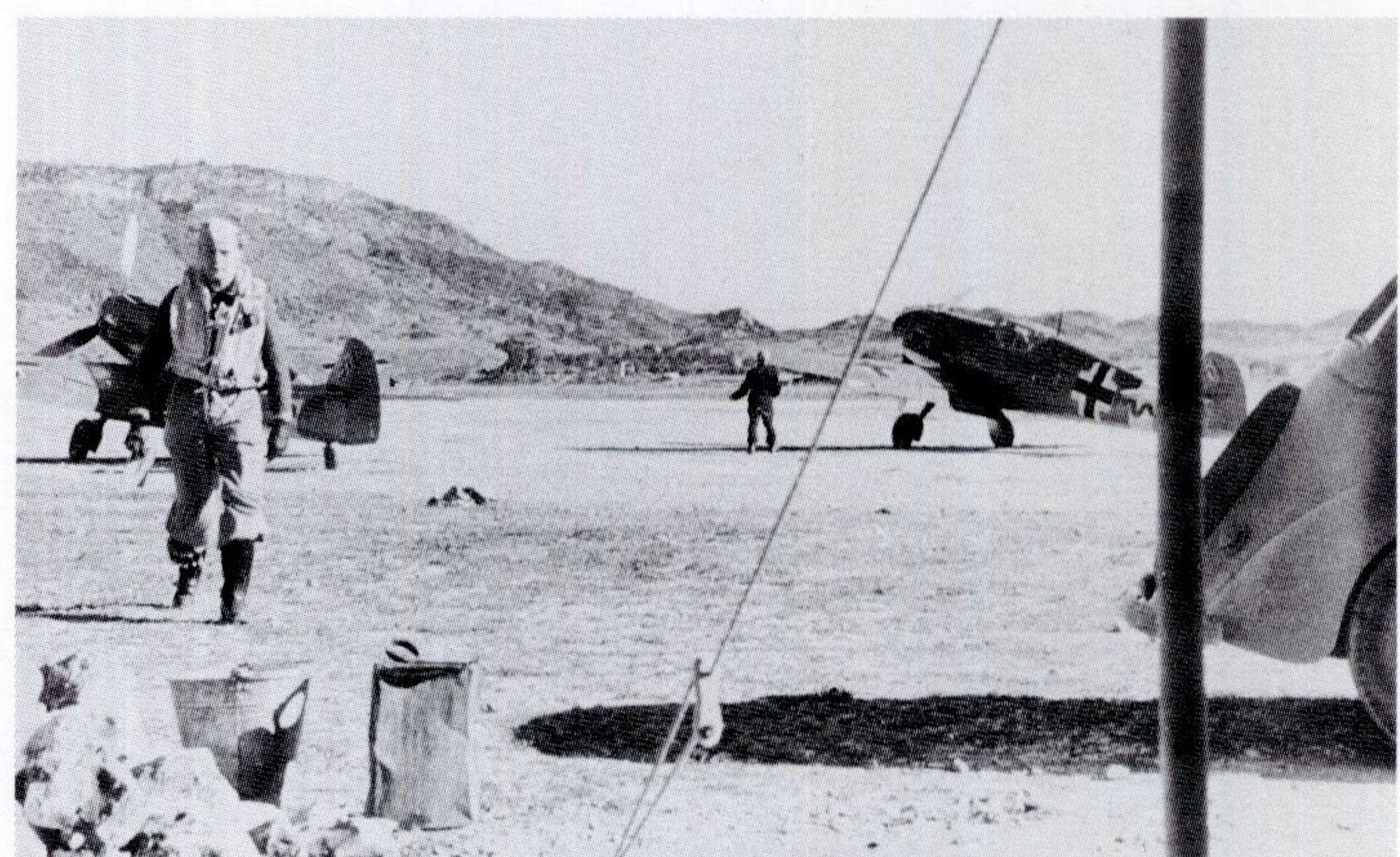


LEFT AND BELOW LEFT:

'Red 2', a Bf 109 F-4 trop, was another aircraft of 8./JG 27 based on Rhodes in February 1943. It carried a single white victory bar on its rudder. Note the two styles employed when the green was applied to the wings, the pattern on the port wing being different from the starboard one.

Messerschmitt Bf 109 F-4 trop 'Red 2' of 8./JG 27 based at Gadurra, Rhodes, February 1943

Although this aircraft was originally camouflaged in a 74/75/76 factory finish, it is thought the the uppersurfaces only were later repainted 79 leaving an area around the swastika in 76. At some time, the scheme was further modified with an overspray of dark green, the pattern on the starboard wing closely resembling the so-called wave mirror pattern of a meandering line whereas that on the port wing appeared more random and denser. The spinner was predominantly Green 70 with a white segment and the Gruppe symbol was superimposed on a white band which encircled the rear fuselage. Note that the propeller blades show signs of severe abrasion and that the paint has been completely stripped from the tips.



ABOVE: Two more Bf 109 F-4 trop aircraft of 8./JG 27 on Rhodes, the aircraft on the right being coded 'Red 6'.



LEFT: In mid-November 1942, Oblt. Georg Seelmann, Staffelführer of 4./JG 51, was at Jessau in Germany with the rest of the Staffel converting to the Fw 190 when orders came through to move to the Mediterranean area. Abandoning the conversion, the Staffel reverted to the Bf 109 G-2 and flew south to provide support for those elements of JG 27, JG 53 and JG 77 already in this theatre.



LEFT: Fw Anton Hafner, previously with 6./JG 51, was awarded the Ritterkreuz on 28 August 1942 following a period of operations in Russia during which he was credited with 60 victories. Hafner claimed two more victories in Russia before going on leave, and when this expired in November 1942, he was posted to join Oblt. Seelmann's 4./JG 51, by then in the Mediterranean. Hafner claimed his 63rd victory, his first in the Mediterranean, on 16 November and was credited with a total of 20 victories in this theatre. On 14 January 1943 he was forced to bale out of his Bf 109 G-2 after combat with a Spitfire, in the course of which he broke an arm and had to leave the area. He did not return to combat flying until August 1943 and, as shown in this later photograph, received the Oak Leaves before being killed in Russia.

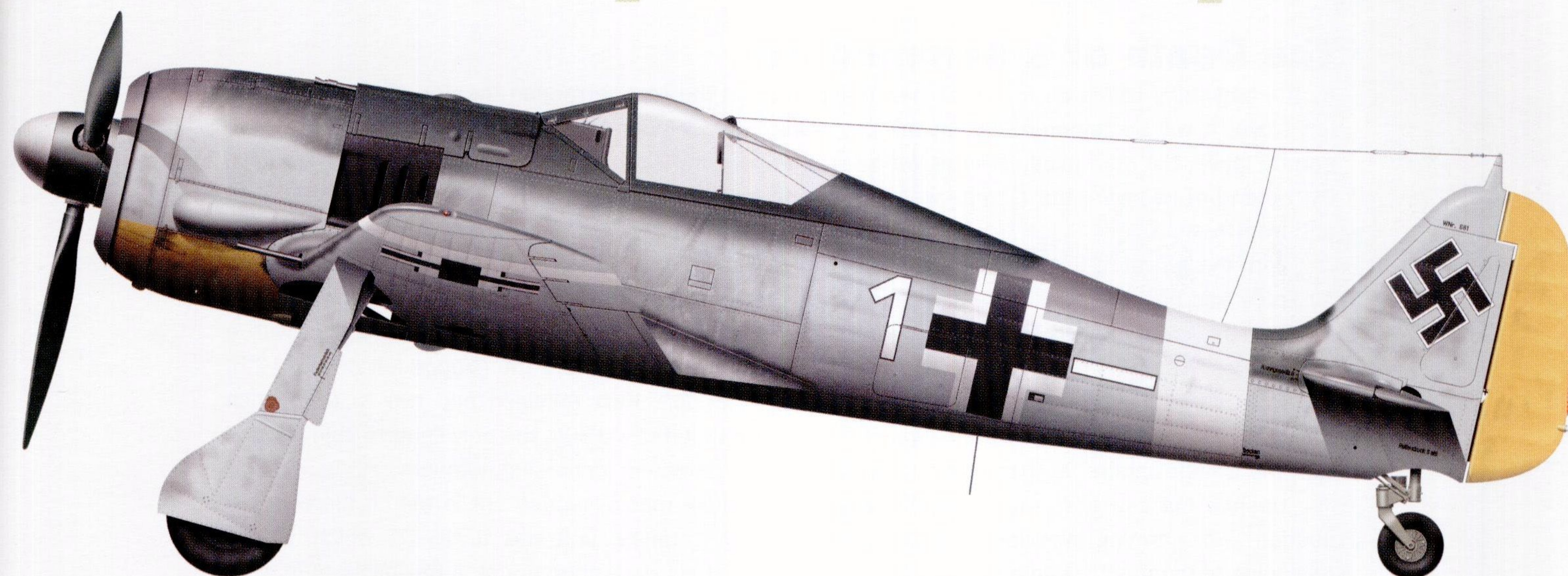
BELOW: The Winter of 1942/43 in Tunisia was one of the worst on record, with low cloud, high winds and torrential rainstorms restricting flying operations. The waterlogged ground is evident in this photograph of 'Yellow 5', a Bf 109 G-2 trop flown by Fw Anton Hafner of 4./JG 51, at Tunis/El Aouina in early 1943. Note the position of the Gruppe bar and the extensive exhaust deposit around the area of the wing root.



Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-2 trop 'Yellow 5' flown by Fw. Anton Hafner of 4./JG 51, Tunisia, early 1943

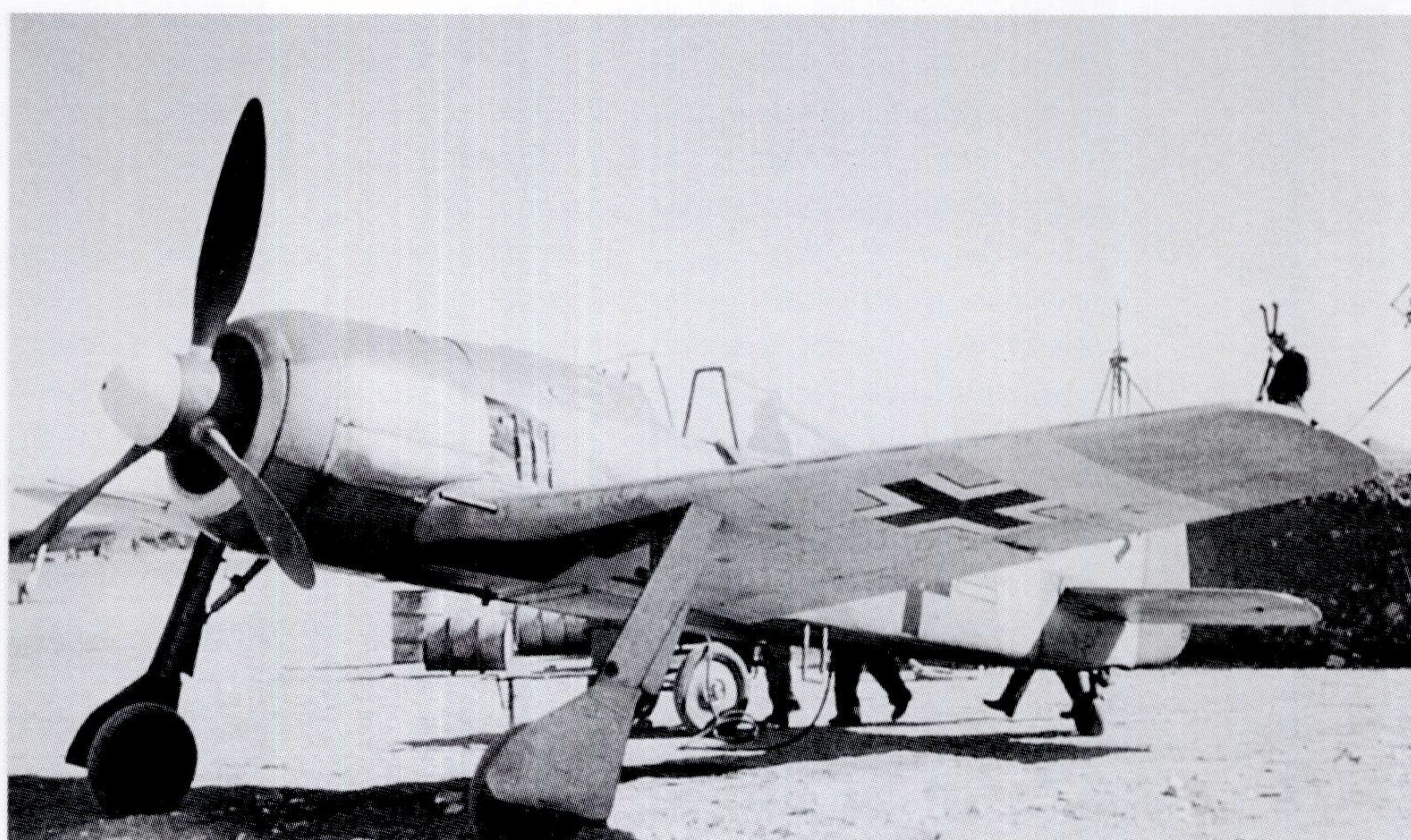
This aircraft was finished in standard RLM 79 uppersurfaces and RLM 78 undersurfaces with white wingtips and a white band around the rear fuselage. The spinner was Green 70 with a white tip, the underside of the engine was yellow and, as frequently observed on JG 51's aircraft at this time, the Gruppe symbol, a white horizontal bar, appeared ahead of the fuselage number. It would seem that this practice was first introduced on the Eastern Front in June 1941.





Focke-Wulf Fw 190 A-4, 'White 1', W.Nr. 681, flown by the Staffelkapitän of 4./JG 2, Oblt. Kurt Bühligen, Kairouan, February 1943

Oblt. Bühligen's aircraft was finished in the standard RLM 74/75/76 camouflage scheme and retained a yellow rudder and engine panel from its service on the Channel Front. A very new-looking white band encircled the rear fuselage and the white band on the wings are believed to have been applied to the upper and lower surfaces of both wingtips.



ABOVE LEFT: Lt. Kurt Bühligen, the Ritterkreuzträger and Staffelkapitän of 4./JG 2, shown here on the Channel Front, was promoted to Oberleutnant at the end of January 1943 and attained 40 of his final 112 victories in Tunisia.

LEFT AND ABOVE: The II./JG 2 arrived in Tunisia at the end of November 1942. This Fw 190 A-4, 'White 1', was flown by the Staffelkapitän of 4./JG 2, Oblt. Kurt Bühligen, and was photographed at Kairouan in February 1943. Note that the outer wing guns have been deleted and that a white stripe has been added to the wingtip. This band is thought to have been a special marking applied to aircraft of units engaged in Unternehmen 'Anton', the German occupation of Vichy France which followed the 'Torch' landings. Although II./JG 2 was only held in readiness during this operation, the white bands were evidently applied in anticipation.



The Death of a Kommodore

By the beginning of March II./JG 27 had reappeared in the Mediterranean theatre. The *Gruppe* had left Libya, it will be remembered, at the beginning of December 1942 and in January, after a well-earned leave, the men assembled at Wien-Aspern where the *Gruppe* received new pilots and aircraft. By the end of February the *Gruppe* was at Trapani, in Sicily, at first mainly flying escort missions to and from Tunisia.

With the arrival of II./JG 27, II./JG 2 was called back to France where the RAF and the US Eighth Air Force had become very aggressive. In some of its last battles in Tunisia, 4./JG 2 lost *Uffz.* Erich Engelbrecht, credited with at least of two victories over Tunisia, who was killed during a fight with a Spitfire near Kairouan on the 8th and another pilot was wounded. Before the *Gruppe* left on the 12th, its pilots claimed nine victories, five being awarded to *Oblt.* Kurt Bühligen and two to *Oblt.* Erich Rüdorffer. Unfortunately, when the *Gruppe* left, it took with it its Fw 190s, the only fighters able to cope with the British Spitfire IX, then operating in the Mediterranean in increasing numbers.

Despite the situation, the *Luftwaffe* continued to claim many victories but in March there was a sudden and alarming increase in losses. The most unfortunate unit was II./JG 51 which, at the beginning of the month, had only 17 aircraft, of which just six were operational. A few pilots then went to Sicily to collect some relatively-lightly armed Bf 109 G-2s and it seems that the *Gruppe* was then mainly engaged in strafing along the Mareth Line. Although this limited the occasions on which it could attack enemy aircraft, the *Gruppe* claimed nine victories but seven of its pilots were killed. One of the most important losses was *Fw.* Karl-Ludwig Zeddies of 5./JG 51, credited with seven victories, who was shot down near Maknassy on the 26th.

Similarly, while JG 53's pilots claimed 32 *Luftsiege*, 13 of them were killed, one was taken prisoner and many others were wounded. Among the casualties were no fewer than four formation leaders: *Lt.* Hans Müller, *Staffelführer* of 1./JG 53, captured after being shot down by anti-aircraft fire, *Oblt.* Dietrich Kasten, *Staffelführer* of 2./JG 53, also wounded by anti-aircraft fire, *Oblt.* Ernst-Albrecht Schultz, *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 53, wounded when La Marsa airfield was bombed, and *Oblt.* Günther Hess, *Staffelkapitän* of 6./JG 53, reported missing over a convoy. *Oblt.* Hess was credited with nine victories and had received the German Cross in Gold.

Most of the other pilots killed or wounded were probably newly-arrived personnel, but one experienced pilot, *Ofw.* Herbert Rollwage of 5./JG 53 and a future *Ritterkreuzträger*, was injured on 2 March when he crash-landed his Bf 109 G-4 near Bou Arada following an engagement with a four-engined bomber. Rollwage had claimed 11 victories in Russia, 20 over Malta and 6 in Tunisia. As he remained in Africa, he either recovered quickly or, perhaps, did not wish to leave his comrades.

In Sicily, II./JG 27 claimed 13 victories in March but lost some aircraft and three pilots, mainly due to accidents. The fighting on 3 March is notable on account of the fact that on this date pilots of 5./JG 27 were credited with six Spitfires, three of them destroyed near Malta.

In spite of the enemy's superiority, the Allied attacks on the airfields and the many supply problems, JG 77 remained very aggressive and, receiving examples of the new Bf 109 G-6, claimed 98 victories in March. On 13 March, the *Kommodore*, *Major* Joachim Müncheberg, and pilots of II./JG 77 claimed five P-40s and 13 P-39s shot down near La Fauconnerie, although in fact only seven P-39 Airacobras of the American 81st Fighter Group were really lost. As with the other German fighter units operating in Tunisia, however, losses were heavy and JG 77 lost 18 pilots killed and three more taken prisoner. Undoubtedly, the most serious of these was the death of *Major* Müncheberg himself on the 23rd. According to his *Kaczmarek* and close friend *Lt.* Gerhard Strasen, Müncheberg attacked a Spitfire and shot it down, his 135th victory, but parts of the destroyed Spitfire struck his Bf 109 G-6 and Müncheberg crashed to his death near Gafsa. Another version of events, from the Allied side, mentions that the *Kommodore* was actually shot down by another Spitfire, but the version witnessed by Strasen would seem the more credible.

Grievous as the loss of Müncheberg, one of the greatest aces in the *Luftwaffe*, undoubtedly was, it should not overshadow the misfortune of some other excellent pilots in his *Geschwader*. *Uffz.* Bruno Weidlich of 4./JG 77, for example, had claimed his 33rd *Luftsieg* on the 4th before being wounded near Gabes. Subsequently declared unfit for flying duties, he was discharged from the *Luftwaffe* and later received the German Cross in Gold in recognition of his achievements. *Lt.* Heinz Lüdemann of 8. *Staffel*, who had flown with III./JG 77 since the end of 1941 and had five victories, was killed on the 10th, and *Uffz.* Harry Donath of 5. *Staffel* who had only joined II./JG 77 at the end of 1942 but had claimed four victories over Africa, was severely wounded near Gabes on the 13th. Transferred to the Rosenheim *Lazarett* in Bavaria, he died of his wounds on 24 April.

Other losses included *Oblt.* Heinrich Osswald and *Lt.* Fritz Kolb, both of 4./JG 77 and both killed on 22nd, who had four and three victories respectively; *Lt.* Ferdinand Jahn, an Austrian pilot with eight victories who was *Staffelführer* of 9./JG 77, was killed in combat near Sbeitla on the 24th; and so the list goes on...

The End in Africa

At the end of March the Eighth Army attacked the Mareth Line. The fighting between the two experienced armies was heavy but German forces manning the Line were finally manoeuvred out of their positions by a wide outflanking movement. Although there was no immediate attempt to exploit the breakthrough and the defenders were allowed to retreat, by 6 April Montgomery's Eighth Army and the troops of 'Torch' had joined up in Tunisia. There was then only the one front with the Axis troops isolated in a tight perimeter with their backs to the sea.

The breaking of the Mareth Line was *Feldmarschall* Rommel's last battle in Africa. On 9 March, Rommel flew to see the *Führer* at Vinnitsa but, realising that Africa was now all but lost, and wishing to spare this national hero the ignominy of defeat, Hitler gave the *Feldmarschall* leave of absence in which to convalesce. In fact, Hitler believed that Rommel had lost heart and lacked staying power but, to the Italians, cited Rommel's known ill-health as the official, or more diplomatic, reason for forbidding him to return. General von Arnim remained in Tunis to oversee the last days of the Axis presence in Africa.

In April, II./JG 51 left Africa, the *Gruppe's* official history stating:

"Beginning of April: all old machines are given up and the unit receives G-4s.

6 April: Scramble against two B-17 squadrons. The first one is repulsed and three bombers are damaged but also four of our machines."

In that engagement, *Oblt.* Karl Rammelt claimed a four-engined bomber but it was not confirmed. The *Gruppe's* history continues:

"11 April: A part of the ground personnel is sent to Trapani but two Ju 52 are shot down and 11 men killed.

18 April: Last operations in Africa.

19 April: II./JG 51 exchanges its Bf 109 G-4s for JG 77's G-2s. At 19.00 hrs departure to San Pietro (Sicily)."

On 20 April, *Oblt.* Rammelt, *Oblt.* Horst Walther, *Uffz.* Hans Perzina and another unknown *Unteroffizier* were ordered to ferry the last four dilapidated machines to Sicily, but a few moments after taking off they encountered a formation of Spitfires and the two *Unteroffiziere* were shot down, *Uffz.* Perzina being seriously wounded. The two *Oberleutnante* then returned to Tunis airfield to refuel before starting out again but were then followed over the sea by P-38s. The German aircraft were unarmed and should have been easy prey for the Lightnings, but the two German pilots finally escaped and landed safely in San Pietro. In its final days in Tunisia, II./JG 51 had claimed three victories, losing *Uffz.* Perzina, wounded, and some aircraft destroyed.

At this time the Allied fighters were clearly out to concentrate on attacking transport aircraft still doggedly trying to fly in supplies to the surrounded troops in Tunisia. As the German fighters were still aggressive, it was considered safer to attack the transports over the sea and large numbers of Ju 52s and Savoias were indeed destroyed, the worst attacks occurring on 5 April when, in spite of a few escorting Bf 109 Gs of II./JG 27, 16 six-engined Me 323s of I. and II./KGzbV 323 were shot down over the Gulf of Tunis, mainly by RAAF machines engaged in Operation 'Flax', an Allied air offensive designed to end the airlift completely. Two German fighters were also shot down, *Uffz.* Rolf Pilz of 5./JG 27 being listed missing while *Uffz.* Heinz Schlechter was picked up the next day by the air-sea rescue service after spending some unpleasant hours in his small dinghy. On that same disastrous day, II./JG 27's *Hptm.* Werner Schroer, the former *Kapitän* of 8./JG 27, arrived from Crete as the new *Kommandeur*, replacing *Hptm.* Gustav Rödel who was appointed *Geschwaderkommodore*. Confronted with the Allies' aerial superiority and having many inexperienced pilots in its ranks, II./JG 27 lost seven pilots in aerial combat, nevertheless claiming 26 victories including three B-24s and a B-17. One heavy loss involved the *Gruppen-Adjutant*, *Lt.* Bernhard Schneider, who was killed near Marettimo after having claimed a

P-38 as his 23rd victory. That month, *Lt.* Willy Kientsch of 6./JG 27 claimed six victories, bringing his tally to 22, and the new *Kommandeur*, *Hptm.* Werner Schroer, claimed two.

The three *Gruppen* of JG 53 were very active in April and claimed 78 victories. Together with JG 77, JG 53 was engaged everywhere in the pocket to support the retreating Axis ground troops. Again, the price of that resistance was high, amounting to 19 pilots killed or missing and two taken PoW. The worst of JG 53's losses occurred on 20 April 1943 when the Allied air forces concentrated on bomber attacks against airfields in an effort to render impotent the last *Luftwaffe* units still stubbornly resisting. In those battles, *Hptm.* Wolfgang Tonne, *Staffelkapitän* of 3./JG 53, claimed his last three victories, his 120th to 122nd, but crashed while returning to his

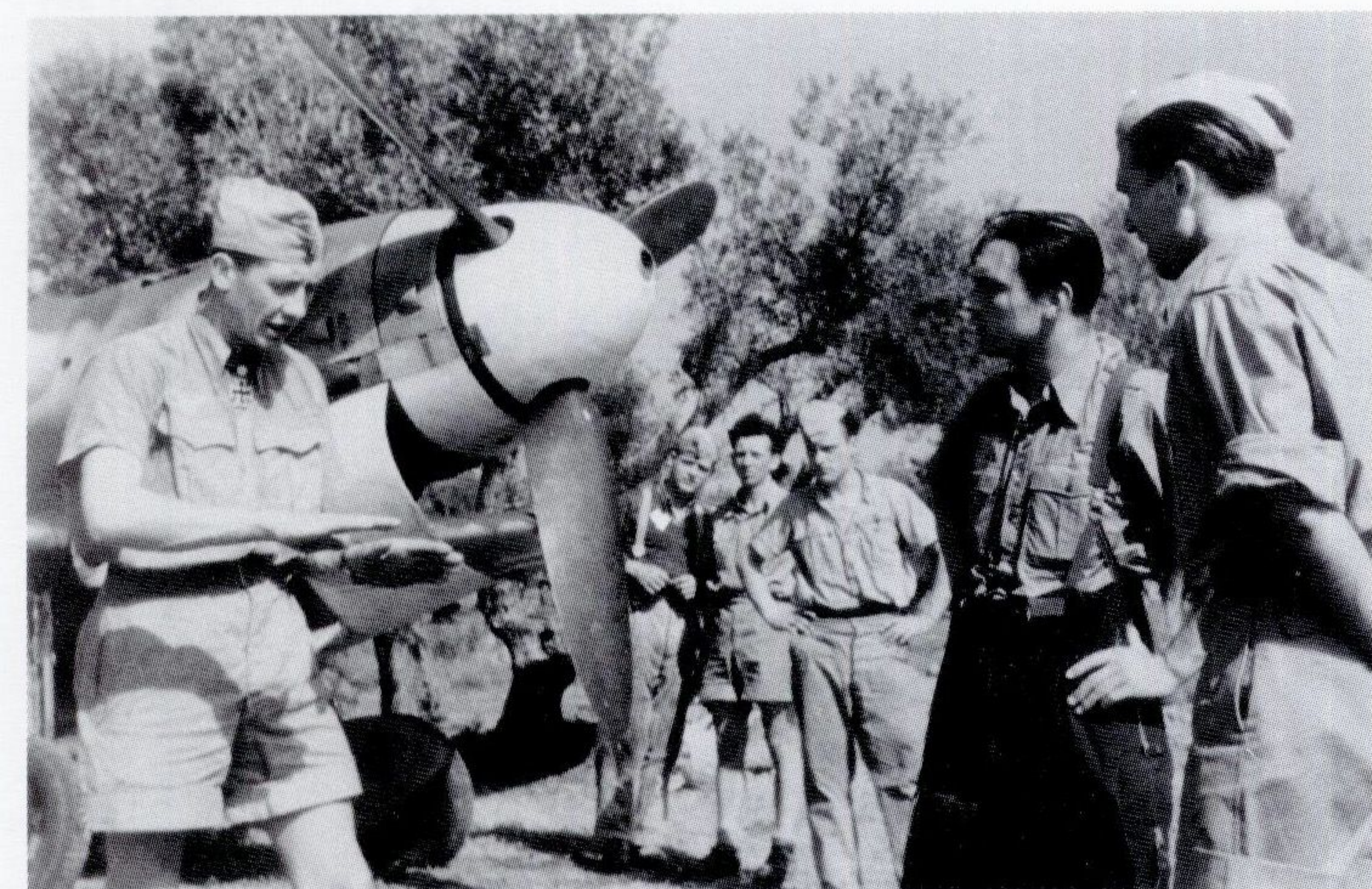
airfield. Details of exactly what happened are confusing, one account mentioning that he had lowered his undercarriage ready to land when he was shot down and killed near Bizerta. However, in a British CSDIC interrogation report, a PoW of JG 53 stated that Tonne, a brilliant fighter pilot, habitually used to perform aerobatics over his airfield when returning from an operational flight and would rock his aircraft's wings to indicate a victory. On the date of his death he buzzed his aerodrome but evidently pulled out of his dive at too steep an angle, stalled and crashed. Tonne, who entered the *Luftwaffe* in 1937, therefore met his death only a few days before the end in Africa and, whatever the true version of events, was another '*Pik As*' *Experte* lost.

Although at the beginning of April the entire JG 77 had only 78 aircraft, of which a mere 32 were serviceable, it continued the struggle with these limited forces and its pilots nevertheless claimed 73 victories, *Lt.* Reinert alone claiming 12, thus bringing his total to 152 victories. *Fw.* Alexander Preinfalk of 5./JG 77, who had been awarded the *Ritterkreuzträger* in October 1942, claimed eight victories bringing his total to 71, but losses also were very high with 14 pilots killed or missing and one taken prisoner. These losses included pilots such as *Fw.* Erich Pförtner who had flown with 6./JG 77 since August 1942 and was credited with three victories before being captured on 2 April. *Fw.* Herbert Hohenberger, who had been with 9./JG 77 since 1942, also had three victories and was killed two days later. *Fw.* Herbert Kittler joined 7./JG 77 in 1941 and had nine claims before being killed on the 6th. *Ofw.* Wilhelm Baumgartner, who had flown in a pre-war bomber unit before being transferred to III./JG 77 at the end of 1940, had been shot down behind the lines in Russia but survived and returned to his unit after walking for five days. He received the German Cross in Gold in August 1942 and claimed his 34th victim on 6 April 1943 before being killed in Tunisia five days later. *Lt.* Rüdiger Belling of 1./JG 77 had claimed three victories over Malta and had a total of four *Abschüsse* when he was killed on 16th. *Ofw.* Walter Schumann, born in 1917, had flown with I.(Jagd)/LG 2 and had claimed six victories before transferring to 3./JG 77 and adding three more before he was shot down by anti-aircraft guns and killed near Bou Arada on the 24th. *Uffz.* Friedrich Röhr was a newcomer who had only joined 8./JG 77 on 26 April 1943 and his *Kapitän*, *Oblt.* Omert, refused to send him into



ABOVE: Three Mediterranean Eichenlaubträger. From the left: *Oblt.* Friedrich Geisshardt of I./JG 77, who claimed his 100th victory in North Africa in December 1942; *Obstlt.* Günther Fhr. von Maltzahn, *Kommodore* of JG 53; and *Hptm.* Heinz Bär, who claimed 61 Allied aircraft in Tunisia, raising his total to 179. The intensity of the air combat and the particularly difficult conditions in Tunisia would leave Bär mentally and physically exhausted.

BELOW: Although only a *Feldwebel* when 4./JG 77 first transferred from Russia to North Africa in October 1942, *Ernst-Wilhelm Reinert* had at that time recently been awarded the Oak Leaves after 103 victories. By the time German forces finally capitulated in Tunisia, Reinert had been promoted to *Hauptmann* and had added another 51 victories to his tally, making him the most successful pilot in the area. As related in the text, *Hptm.* Reinert's last two victories in North Africa were achieved when he was on the transfer flight from North Africa and while he had two passengers aboard his single-seat aircraft. In this photograph, taken shortly before he left Tunisia, Reinert is seen describing his latest sortie. In the background is his Bf 109 G-6 trop.



ABOVE: Another photograph of Reinert seated in the cockpit of his Bf 109 G. Note the stencilling under the cockpit sill which reads '*Beim Schließen der Kabine auf Vorderteil-Gummirahmen achten*' ('On closing the canopy beware of forward frame seal') indicating that this aircraft had a pressurised cockpit. Only the Bf 109 G-1, G-3 and G-5 had pressurised cockpits.

action. Instead, hoping to spare the young and inexperienced pilot's life, he ordered Röhr to ferry a Bf 109 G to Sicily. Röhr took off the following day but for unknown reasons failed to arrive and was reported missing over the sea.

In early April, *Major* Johannes Steinhoff, former *Kommandeur* of II./JG 52, arrived from the Eastern Front to replace the fallen *Major* Müncheberg as *Kommodore* of JG 77. Wearing the *Ritterkreuz* and then credited with 156 *Luftsiege*, Steinhoff was an experienced veteran, having been in the *Luftwaffe* for a long time before the war. On the 4th, the new *Kommodore* shot down a Spitfire but the day after, had to crash-land his Bf 109 G-6 near La Fauconnerie airfield, being himself the victim of another Spitfire. As Wolf Dieter Huy and other pilots coming directly from the Eastern Front had discovered, the tactics in North Africa were very different from those in Russia.

By the end of April, Allied forces were very near Tunis and supplies for the besieged Axis troops became even more scarce. Everyone knew that Africa was lost, but the German fighter pilots nevertheless fought until the bitter end or until ordered to Sicily. I./JG 53 left by sea and air transport on 30 April after handing its few surviving aircraft to II./JG 53.

In the first week of May, while II./JG 27 and III./JG 53 were operating from Sicily, claiming a few *Abschüsse* mainly above the island or over the Gulf of Tunis, II./JG 53 and the three *Gruppen* of JG 77 continued to operate from the few existing airfields in the tiny pocket in Tunisia where von Arnim's Italian and German troops fought on. By the time British tanks reached Tunis on 6 May the front had been penetrated and the last line of resistance broken. Bizerta and Tunis were captured on the 7th and by the afternoon of 8 May the moment had come when there was no more aircraft fuel available. With the agreement of *Armee Gruppe Afrika*, orders were issued for all flying units to be withdrawn to Sicily.

Damaged machines were blown up but, pilots with serviceable aircraft tried wherever possible to take one or two men of the ground personnel with them to Sicily. They were stowed inside the fuselage, just behind the pilot's seat, but with such a heavy load the Bf 109s were difficult to control and only the best pilots could fly with these passengers. JG 77 claimed its last four victories on the 8th, two being attributed to two young pilots, but the most surprising victory was *Lt.* Reinert's 154th *Abschuss*. He took off from Soliman with two men stowed inside in the fuselage of his Bf 109, one being *Lt.* Zeno Bäumel, the aircraft's usual pilot, and the other *Ofw.* Walter, an *Oberwerkmeister*. On the way to Sicily, Reinert noticed two Martlets and, to the great consternation of his passengers, dived and shot down one of them. Reinert's wingman, *Oblt.* Heinz Dudeck destroyed the second Martlet as his fifth victory.

At Korbous, *Major* Steinhoff and his *Stab* watched as some of the last aircraft of JG 77 departed. One of these was a fully-loaded Bf 108 of the *Geschwader Stab* which managed to take off but the overburdened aircraft could not gain altitude and crashed on the airfield border killing the pilot, *Oblt.* Helmut Meckel, and its two passengers. Earlier, Meckel had flown with I./JG 3 and had taken part in the battles of 1940 and 1941, receiving the Knight's Cross for his 25 *Luftsiege*. Severely wounded in Russia, he was declared unfit for front-line duties but refused to remain inactive and succeeded in being posted to a *Jagdgeschwader*, joining *Stab*/JG 77 at the beginning of 1943.

The *Kommodore* and other remaining pilots hurriedly buried their three unfortunate comrades in an improvised grave alongside the landing ground. They then climbed into their 'Gustavs' and took off for Sicily, almost certainly the last German fighter pilots to leave Tunisia.

By 11 May all resistance had ended. German and Italian troops laid down their arms in wholesale surrender and by 12 May, over 250,000 had given themselves up. On 13 May, the Axis armies in Tunisia capitulated.



ABOVE: Photographed taxiing on one of the coastal airfields near Tunis/El Aouina at the end of April 1943 is a Bf 109 G-6 of 4./JG 77 coded 'White 2'. A member of the ground staff is sitting on the wing to guide the pilot while another stands by ready to man the MG 17 of the airfield defence system. The aircraft has standard white theatre markings on the rear fuselage, wingtips and spinner and appears to be finished in a 74/75/76 scheme.

BELOW: On 12 May 1943, Generaloberst Hans-Jürgen von Arnim, commander of Army Group Africa and C-in-C of German forces, surrendered himself, the Panzer General Krause, and their Staffs. After a meeting at British First Army HQ, von Arnim was taken to Gibraltar and from there on to Britain. Here, von Arnim steps from the aircraft which landed him in Britain on 16 May. He remained a prisoner until the end of the war. The final surrender of the last Axis forces in Tunisia was agreed with the supreme commander, Field-Marshal Giovanni Messe, on 13 May.





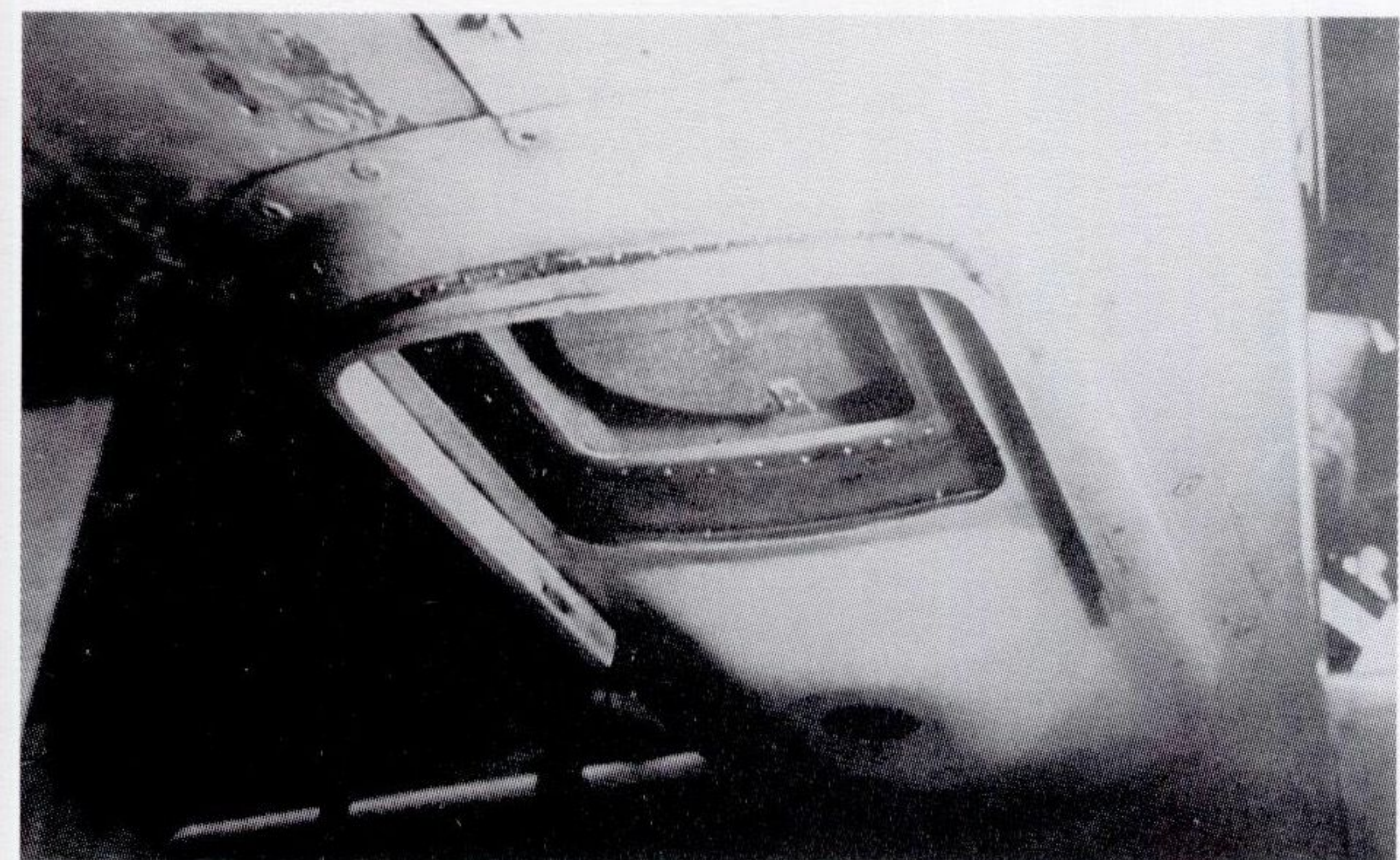
THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: During the whole of the campaign in Tunisia, the Aufklärungsgruppen carried out some valuable work, returning with reconnaissance results even in the face of Anglo-American superiority, and were a reliable weapon to those who planned the campaign. In addition, when III./SKG 10 made attacks on difficult to locate aerodromes of the Desert Air Force, they were guided to their target by aircraft of 2.(H)/ Aufklärungsgruppe 14. On 1 March 1943, Lt. Metz of the short-range reconnaissance Staffel 2.(H)/ 14 took off in this Bf 109 G-2/R2 reconnaissance fighter in company with his Staffelkapitän, Hptm. Warmbold, who was flying another aircraft. Warmbold returned from this mission but Metz's 'Black 14' was shot down near Zarzis in Tunisia. The pilot, who had been on his 138th war flight, found his way back to his unit on foot, arriving four days later. Meanwhile, on 2 March, Hptm. Warmbold took off with a Rotte from JG 53 but became involved in an air battle near Souk el Khemis with a larger formation of British aircraft and was shot down and taken prisoner. It was Warmbold's 32nd war flight. Lt. Metz's 'Black 14', shown in these photographs being examined by troops from a Scottish unit, was later taken over by squadrons of the USAAF and eventually shipped to America for structural tests. The code 'Black 14' has obviously been painted over an earlier identity and the name 'Irmgard', was painted in white lettering below the windscreen. 2.(H)/14 operated from various aerodromes in Northern Tunisia, frequently co-operating with JG 51 and SKG 10, as well as JG 53 with which it sometimes shared the same aerodromes. By the end of March, 2.(H)/14 had flown over 2,300 sorties, mostly photo-reconnaissance but probably including sea reconnaissance and dropping rubber dinghies. The Staffel also flew sorties using a Fieseler Storch which was used to drop reports to forward Headquarters, some of the recorded sorties being of this nature.



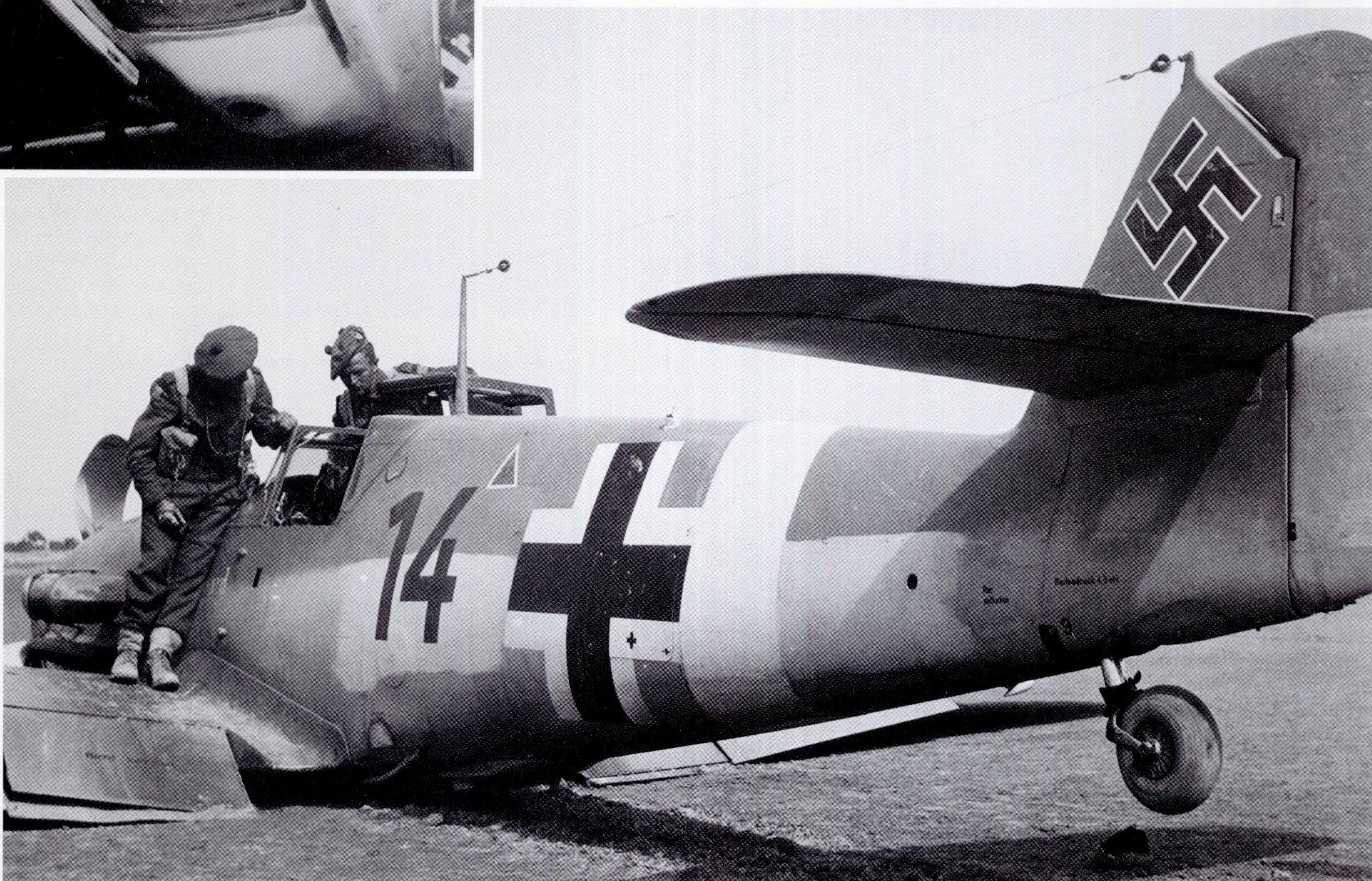


Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-2/R2 'Black 14' of 2.(H)/14, Tunisia, March 1943

This aircraft, W.Nr. 10605, had the usual yellow underside to the engine cowlings and was camouflaged in the standard tropical scheme of RLM 78 and 79. The spinner was green RLM 70 with a white segment and the name 'Irmgard' was painted in white on the fuselage side, just forward of the windscreen. There was a white band around the rear fuselage and signs of repainting in 65 and 79 were evident behind as well as ahead of the fuselage cross. There is some evidence that a few of 2.(H)/14's Bf 109 Gs came from JG 53 and, in view of the camouflage scheme and repainting on this aircraft, it is thought that it may have previously served with that Geschwader.



LEFT: The closed end of the U-shaped oil deflector was mounted forward of the camera fairing. This photograph shows a Fw 190 A-3/U4 reconnaissance fighter, but the arrangement beneath the Bf 109 was almost identical.



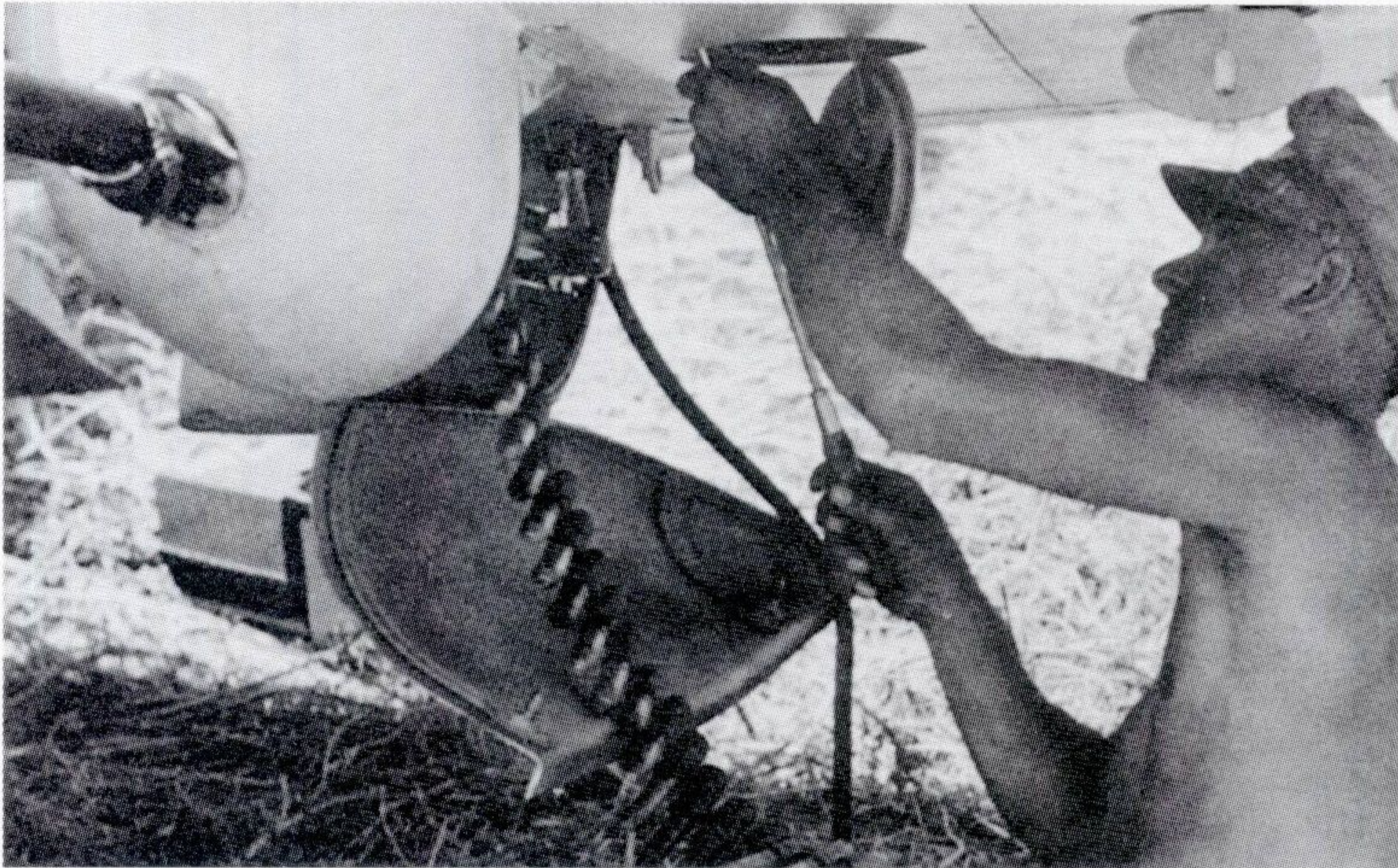
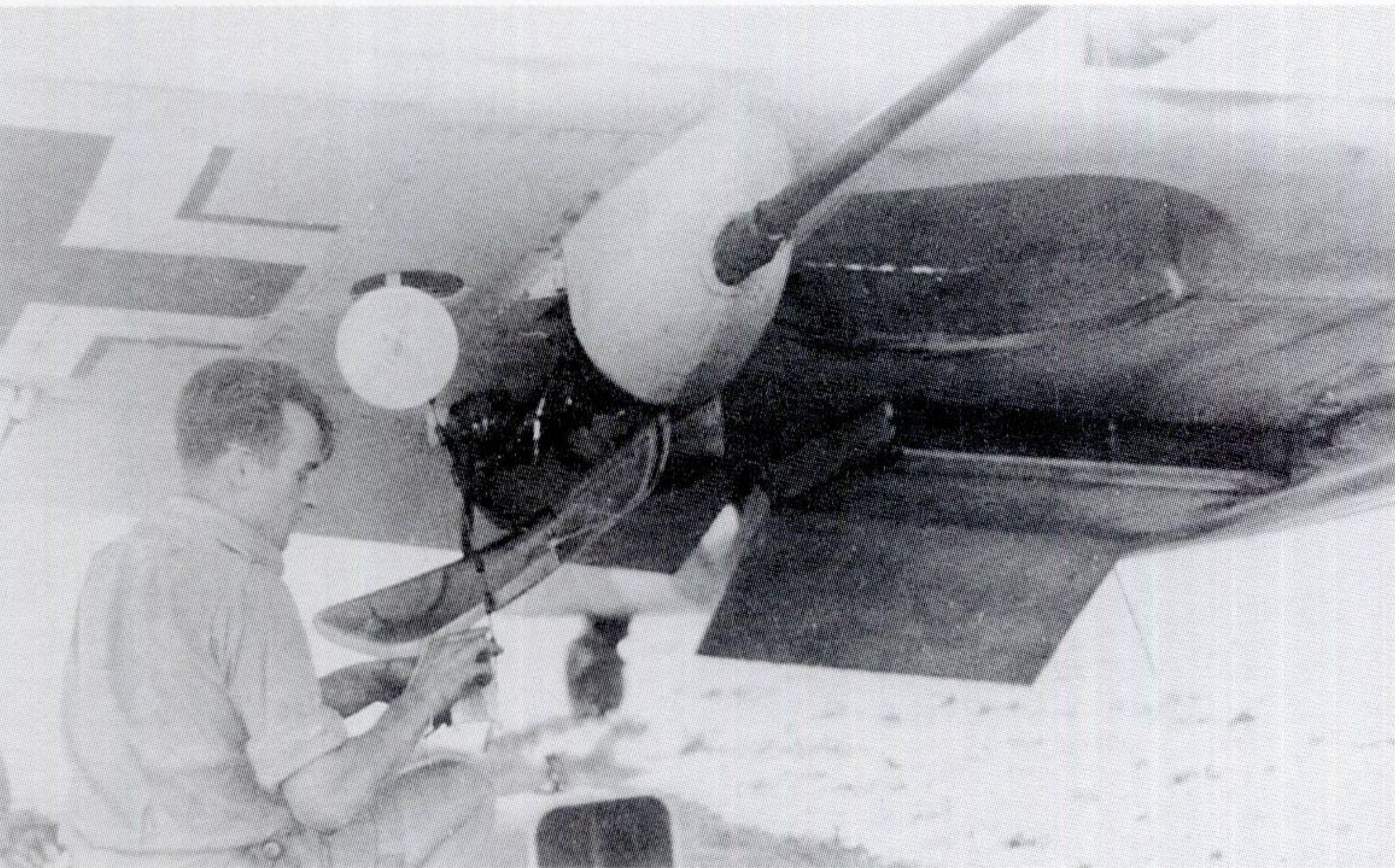
ABOVE: Just visible beneath the fuselage and aft of the wing trailing edge is the camera fairing and one side of a U-shaped channel which, on reconnaissance versions of the Bf 109 and Fw 190, deflected leaking engine oil away from the camera lens.

RIGHT: This photograph of pilots of 4./JG 53 running to their aircraft at La Marsa, Tunisia, in March 1943 was probably enacted for the benefit of a PK cameraman who wished to portray an 'Alarmstart'. The aircraft are Bf 109 G-2 tropes, 'White 4' being the machine flown by Ritterkreuzträger Oblt. Fritz Dinger, while 'White 5', just visible in the background, was normally flown by Ofw. Stefan Litjens. Blind in one eye as a result of wounds received when he was shot down in Russia, Litjens flew many ground-attack sorties and claimed eight victories in Tunisia, bringing his total to 32, for which he was decorated with the Knight's Cross on 21 June 1943.



LEFT: Oberstleutnant Günther von Maltzahn (centre), the Kommodore of JG 53, speaking into a microphone held by Luftwaffe war correspondent Lt. Karl Holzamer. Whether recorded or broadcast live, wireless reports from the various fronts were seen as an important boost to home morale. For this reason they were often bellicose and excessively patriotic and, while readily consumed by the intended audience, all but the most blatant line-shooters found them embarrassing since, by their very nature, they invariably emphasised the interviewee's personal experiences and accomplishments. Such broadcasts must have been especially awkward for the normally modest and reserved von Maltzahn. In this photograph, the officer on the left is Hptm. Christoph Prinz von Hessen, who was the Geschwader Ia and Major beim Stab.

BELOW LEFT AND RIGHT: Late in March 1943, III./ JG 77 started replacing its Bf 109 G-2s with G-6s. Generally, the pilots were not entirely satisfied with this version for while it flew perfectly, the additional weight of the MG 151 guns and ammunition affected the aircraft's manoeuvrability. Although the underwing gondola cannon gave the Bf 109 an added punch, some pilots were so concerned they preferred to fly without the extra weapons. Each MG 151 was mounted on its side and the ammunition was stored in the wings.



Joachim Müncheberg

Joachim Müncheberg was born in Friedrichshof in Pommerania on 31 December 1918, just six weeks after the armistice which ended the First World War. After schooling, his first experience of military life came in October 1936 when he joined the infantry, but in October 1938 he transferred to the *Luftwaffe* as an officer cadet. Upon completion of his flying training, having experienced all the benefits of peacetime conditions in the pre-war *Luftwaffe*, he was posted to JG 132 as an *Oberfähnrich*, or senior officer cadet. This unit flew the Bf 109, an aircraft which Müncheberg would fly for much of his career.

On 1 May 1939, the *Geschwader* was redesignated JG 26 and received the honour title '*Schlageter*' in memory of Albert Leo Schlageter, a German activist shot by a French firing squad in 1923 for sabotage. Throughout the Summer of 1939, tension in Europe increased and in August, parts of JG 26 moved up to patrol Germany's western border with Belgium and Holland. Following the German invasion of Poland on 1 September and the declaration of war on Germany by Britain and France on the 3rd, the *Geschwader's* first victory occurred on 28 September when a pilot of 2. *Staffel* apparently shot down a Curtiss Hawk 75. Generally, however, the *Geschwader* would see little action until the German invasion of France and the Low Countries in May 1940, although on 7 November, Müncheberg was credited with the unit's second victory when he accounted for an RAF Blenheim. By this time, Müncheberg had been commissioned as a *Leutnant* and, although still only 20 years old, his intelligence and maturity had been recognised and he had been appointed *Gruppenadjutant* of III./JG 26.

The period of quiet in the West came to an abrupt end on the morning of 10 May 1940 with German attacks on Holland and Belgium. JG 26 was in action from the start, its pilots claiming eight victories on the 10th and, on the 11th, claimed another nine, of which one, a Hawk 75, was shot down near Antwerp by *Lt.* Müncheberg as his second victory. Unlike many aces who required a long period to become acclimatised to aerial combat, Müncheberg had no such problems and claimed a Hurricane shot down north of Mons on the 14th, another Hurricane south-east of Brussels on the 15th and a Spitfire west of Dunkirk on 29 May. Even more remarkably, on the 31st he claimed three aircraft – a Lysander and two Hurricanes – in his first mission of the day, adding a Spitfire in the evening. Four aircraft claimed in a day was then an unprecedented achievement and his total of nine victories placed him well ahead of any other pilot in the *Geschwader*.

Following the fall of France, Müncheberg was promoted to *Oberleutnant* and the air fighting now extended over the Channel and towards England. On 28 July, Müncheberg claimed a Hurricane as his tenth victory and, following further successes, claimed a Spitfire on 15 August as his 13th victory. It was at this time that *Reichsmarschall* Göring decided to invigorate the *Luftwaffe* and began replacing his unit leaders with younger men. In the reorganisations that followed, *Major* Adolf Galland became the new *Kommodore* on 22 August and, among other changes, *Oblt.* Müncheberg was given command of 7. *Staffel*, known as the 'Red Heart' *Staffel* on account of the unit's emblem.

At that time, 20 victories were required for the award of the coveted *Ritterkreuz* and Müncheberg reached this number on 14 September when, during a fighter sweep to London, he is believed to have destroyed a Spitfire south of Maidstone. By the end of the year, Müncheberg had 23 victories to his name.

Meanwhile, the Italian effort against the British in Libya had run into difficulties and, in December, the Italians accepted an offer of German reinforcements. The whole of X. *Fliegerkorps*, then based in Norway, was ordered to Sicily in order to neutralise Malta. As this *Fliegerkorps* possessed no fighter unit, it was decided that a Bf 109 *Staffel* should be added to the forces on Sicily in the form of 22-year old Müncheberg's 7./JG 26, which arrived at Gela, in Sicily, on 9 February, equipped with new Bf 109 E-7 aircraft. The *Staffel's* first operation was flown on 12 February, during which Müncheberg shot down a Hurricane off Malta, followed by two more on the 16th.

In the following two weeks, Müncheberg's *Staffel* was instrumental in winning air superiority over the battered island fortress, and with the British air defences seriously weakened by attacks carried out by German and Italian bombers and dive-bombers, the fighters of 7./JG 26 grew more aggressive, flying lower over the island and sometimes strafing surface targets. But at this point, the situation in North Africa demanded that *Luftwaffe* bomber units in Sicily should be transferred to Libya, inadvertently allowing Malta a temporary respite and leaving 7./JG 26 as the largest German unit on Sicily.



BELOW: Ground staff attending to Müncheberg's Bf 109 E-7 'White 12' at Gelea, Sicily, probably in February or March 1941 when 7./JG 27 was operating against Malta. A profile of this aircraft appears on Page 199 of Volume 3, Section 3. Note on the cowling the red heart *Staffel* badge which was later adopted by JG 77.





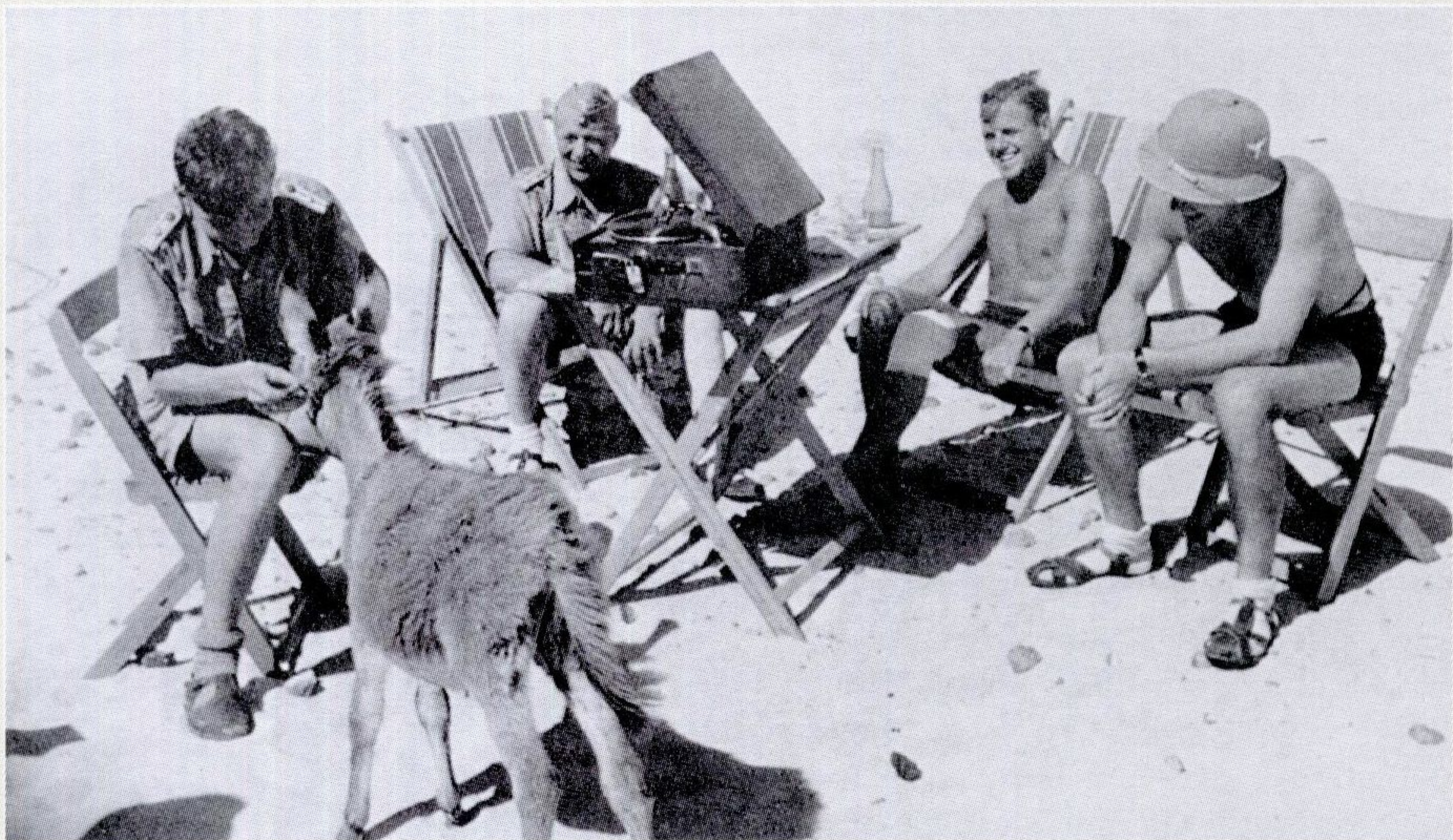
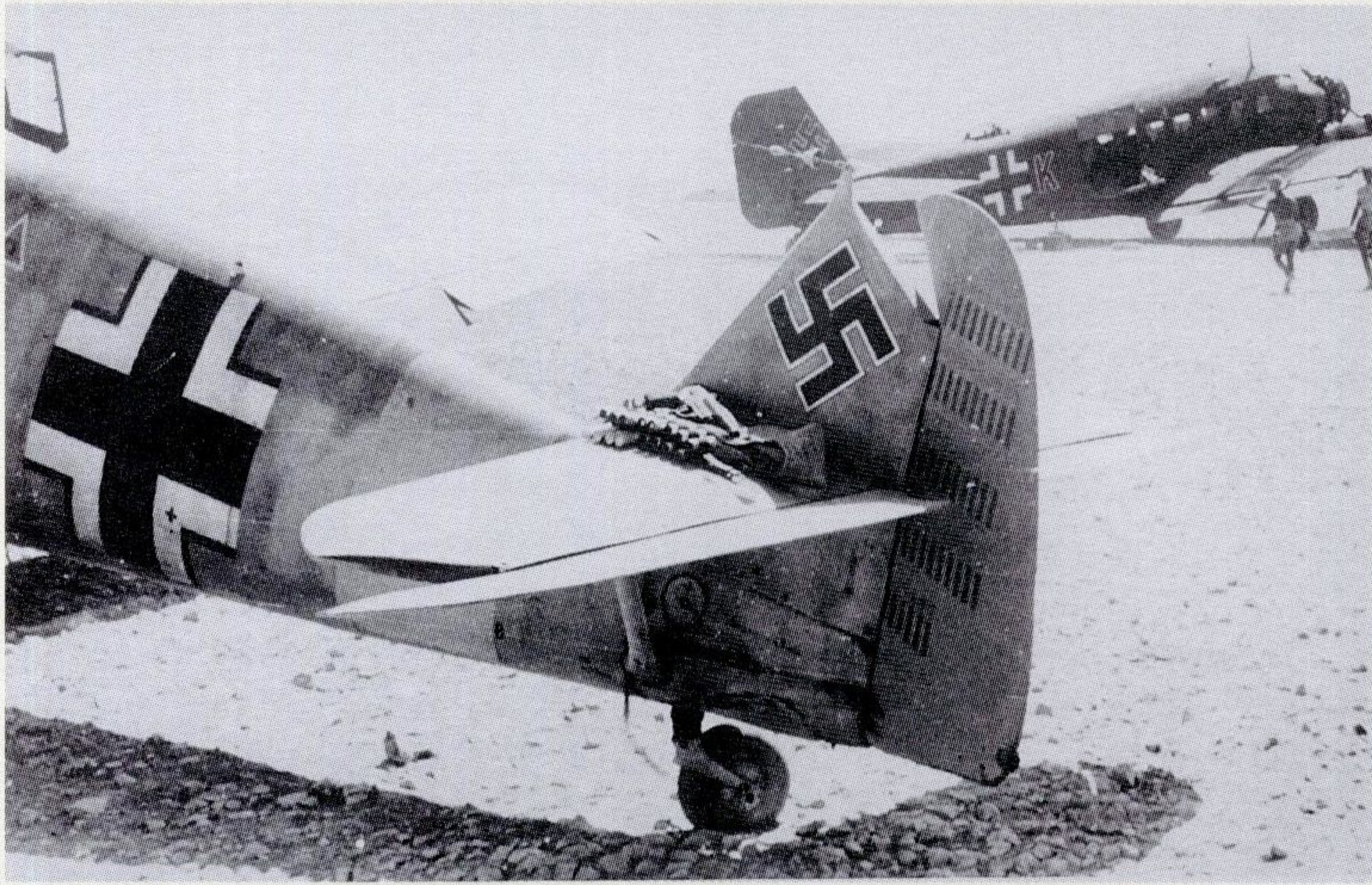
ABOVE: Müncheberg receiving congratulations after returning from a successful mission over Malta.

Throughout March, Müncheberg and his pilots continued the battle over Malta, claiming one Sunderland flying boat destroyed on the water and another damaged, plus a Blenheim, a Wellington and ten Hurricanes destroyed in the air. Then, on 5 April, the *Staffel* moved to Taranto to support the imminent German attack on Yugoslavia and Greece. The *Staffel's* part in this campaign, however, was brief and consisted of a single attack on Podgorica airfield on 6 April, during which Müncheberg shot down two Avia fighters and destroyed another on the ground. With the campaign progressing smoothly, further participation by a large part of the assembled fighter force was not required and on the 8th the *Staffel* returned to Gela and resumed its missions against Malta. By 1 May, Müncheberg had added another four Hurricanes to his tally but on that day alone he was credited with another four, raising his total to 41 victories. On the 7th, he became only the 12th recipient of the Oak Leaves and, at the same time, received the Italian *Medaglia D'Oro al Valor Militare*, the Gold Medal for Bravery. This was Italy's highest military award and Müncheberg was one of only two German recipients, the other being Hans-Joachim Marseille. Even Rommel had to be content with the silver version.

On 14 June, the *Staffel* moved to Libya where it joined I./JG 27, although Müncheberg was able to plan and carry out his missions independently. The first mission in Libya was flown on 16 June but, as the *Staffel's* aircraft lacked the sand

affected by the desert conditions and the number of serviceable aircraft gradually declined to a point where only a few of the unit's machines remained operational. The *Staffel* flew its last known combat mission in Africa on 21 August, by which time it had scored only eight victories in North Africa, five of which were awarded to Müncheberg. Nevertheless, the record of the *Staffel* during its whole period of operations in the Mediterranean was unique, for it had made a significant contribution to the air war in the theatre and had claimed 52 enemy aircraft, 25 of which were claimed by Müncheberg, bringing his personal total to 48 victories. Moreover, in six months of operations, the *Staffel* had not suffered a single loss.

BELOW: Müncheberg flew two Bf 109 E-7s in the Mediterranean theatre, 'White 12', shown on the previous page, and this 'White 1' which was photographed in Libya in July 1941. The 46 victory bars on the rudder indicate that this photograph was taken after 15 July but before his 47th victory on the 29th.



Müncheberg in tropical uniform (LEFT) wearing the Oak Leaves, awarded on 7 May 1941 and (ABOVE) in less formal attire, second from right, relaxing with fellow pilots of 7./JG 26 in Libya.

Although the transfer of his *Staffel* back to France was not completed until the end of September, Oblt. Müncheberg himself returned earlier and on 26 August shot down a Spitfire as his 49th victory. On 19 September, with 56 victories, he was promoted to *Hauptmann* and given command of the Fw 190-equipped II./JG 26. He claimed his first victory in the new aircraft on 13 October when he destroyed another Spitfire and by 6 June 1942, when he was awarded the German Cross in Gold, he had destroyed at least another 24 Spitfires. By the end of June he had accounted for another two Spitfires, bringing his total number of victories to 83.



As well as being the highest-scoring pilot in JG 26, Müncheberg was highly respected by his fellow pilots who regarded him also as an outstanding pilot and leader. Although still only 23 years old, he possessed intelligence, a strong character and the ability to analyse an issue and concentrate only on what was important. With these qualities, coupled with his success and experience, it was only a matter of time before he was given command of a *Geschwader* and, in July, he left JG 26 and travelled to the Eastern Front where he was to tour each of the fighter units and learn the tasks of a *Kommodore*. Naturally, at the same time, he continued with operational flying and on 5 September he claimed his 100th aerial victory, receiving the Swords four days later. By the end of September, Müncheberg had claimed 33 Russian aircraft, bringing his total to 116 victories.

A vacancy for a new *Kommodore* arose on 30 September when *Major* Gordon Gollob, commanding officer of JG 77, was posted away to take up another position, and on 1 October, Müncheberg, at that time attached to *Stab*/JG 51, was promoted to *Major* and took over *Jagdgeschwader* 77. Almost immediately, JG 77 was posted to North Africa, and began to arrive at the end of October. Despite the enemy's growing superiority, JG 77 remained very aggressive with *Major* Müncheberg claiming his



ABOVE: Hptm. Müncheberg, wearing Ritterkreuz, as Kommandeur of II./JG 26 in France.

119th victory on 10 December and his 120th and 121st on the 14th. By the end of December, Müncheberg had a total of 129 victories and eventually shot down 20 aircraft in this, his second spell of duty in North Africa, raising his total victories to 134.

Major Müncheberg met his death on 23 March when, together with his wingman, *Lt.* Strasen, he took off from La Fauconnerie, on a *freie Jagd* mission to reconnoitre the front in the Sened/El Guettar area. When about 50 km from Gafsa, the two German pilots observed a formation of American Spitfires from the 52nd Fighter Group and, with Müncheberg leading, the two pilots attacked the low-flying enemy fighters from above. Although exactly what happened next is unclear, it would seem that Müncheberg, despite his long experience and many victories, made an uncharacteristic error of judgement and closed at too great a speed on his target. As a result, he was forced to open fire at such close range that when his rounds hit the Spitfire he was attacking, it burst into flames and either collided with Müncheberg's Bf 109 G-6 or exploded so that parts of it struck Müncheberg's aircraft. In either event, due to the height at which the attack took place, Müncheberg was unable to bale out and he crashed to his death.

Instead of flying back to La Fauconnerie, *Lt.* Strasen made for Fatnassa, the base of *Major* Heinz Bär's I./JG 77. It is said that when Strasen landed after this mission, he was ashen-faced and when he climbed out of his aircraft and reported to Bär, he could only say, '*Herr Hauptmann*, Jochen is dead!'. Immediately, a Fiesler *Storch* was sent to collect Müncheberg's body. He was found near Gafsa, still in the cockpit of his Bf 109 and close to the Spitfire he had destroyed as his 135th and final victory. He was first buried at El Aouina near Tunis but was later transferred to the nearby *Heldenfriedhof* at Les Massem.

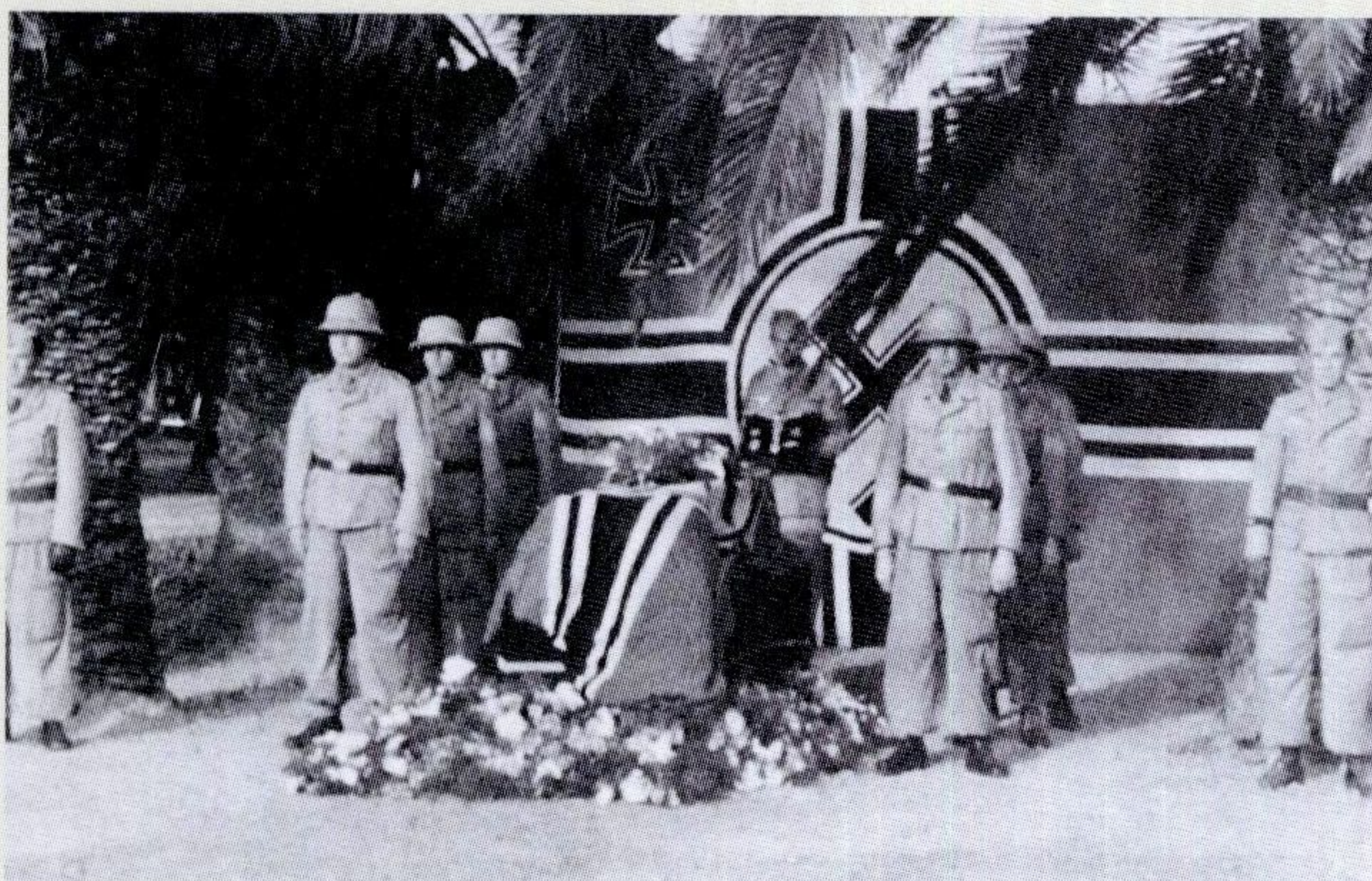
The death of one of the most outstanding German fighter pilots was naturally a grievous loss and, in some respects, was strangely similar to Marseille's in that both were great aces renowned for their actions in the Mediterranean. Both were also charismatic personalities and although each was killed in his aircraft, they fell unvanquished in that neither was defeated in the air or shot down. Additionally, just as Marseille's death was considered an ill omen which preceded by a few weeks Eighth Army's attack at El Alamein, so Müncheberg's death occurred shortly before Axis forces were compelled to withdraw into Tunisia as a result of General Montgomery's offensive against the Mareth Line.

Later, as a final tribute to its fallen *Kommodore*, JG 77 adopted the red heart emblem of Müncheberg's original command, 7./JG 26, and thereafter JG 77 became known as the '*Herz As*', or 'Ace of Hearts' *Geschwader*.

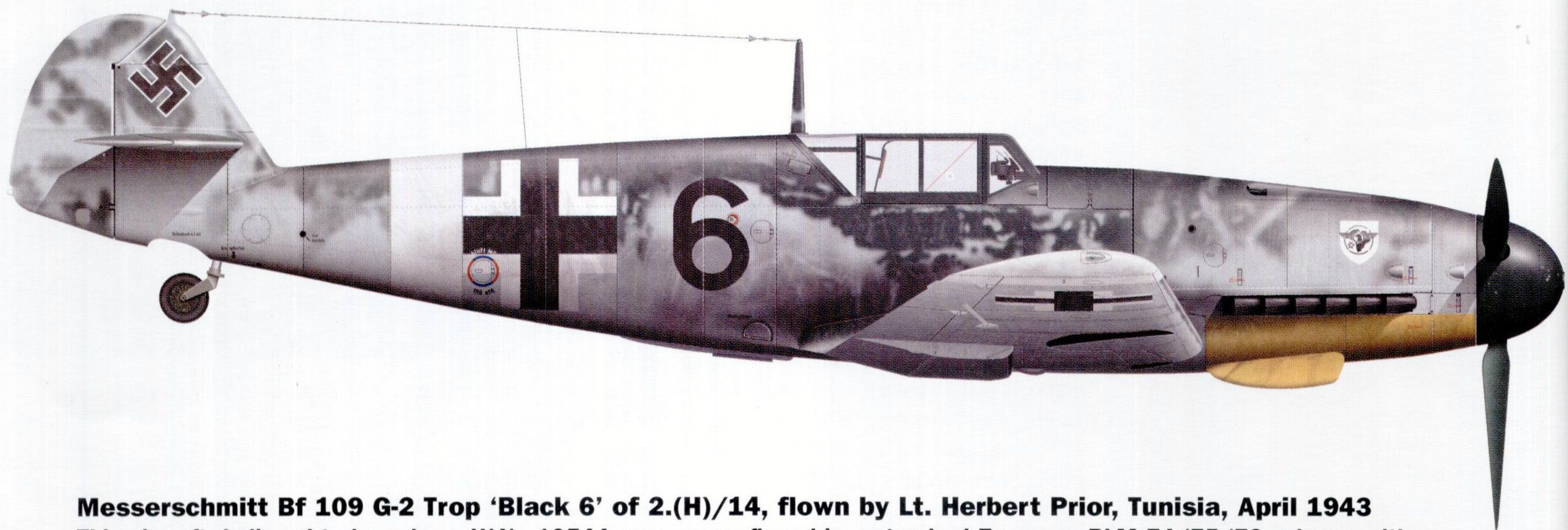
BELOW: A late-war Bf 109 of JG 77 showing the *Geschwader*'s 'Herz As' emblem which was designed to commemorate Müncheberg and his leadership of 7./JG 26.



ABOVE: Müncheberg wearing the Swords, presented on 9 September 1942, shortly after his 100th aerial victory. Note also the Frontflugschirm in Gold worn on his left breast and, on the pocket flap, the Italian pilots' wings. Luftwaffe pilots closely co-operating with other Axis air forces, e.g. Rumania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, etc., frequently received an honorary award of that country's pilots' badge.



RIGHT: On 23 March 1943 the *Kommodore* of JG 77, Eichenlaubträger *Major* Joachim Müncheberg, was killed when his aircraft crashed almost immediately after he had destroyed a Spitfire as his 135th victory. His machine is thought to have collided with debris from his victim, causing a wing of his own aircraft to break away. After a military funeral, Müncheberg was buried first at El Aouina and later transferred to the nearby military cemetery at Les Massem.



Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-2 Trop 'Black 6' of 2.(H)/14, flown by Lt. Herbert Prior, Tunisia, April 1943

This aircraft, believed to have been W.Nr. 10544, was camouflaged in a standard European RLM 74/75/76 scheme with mottled fuselage sides and a splinter pattern on the upper surface of the wings and horizontal tail surfaces. The spinner and propeller blades were overall green 70 and a white band encircled the rear fuselage. The fuselage Balkenkreuze were the mid-war type without black outlines and the wing crosses were the white outline type. The white shield of the unit emblem was probably applied by hand but the black details have been sprayed through a single stencil.





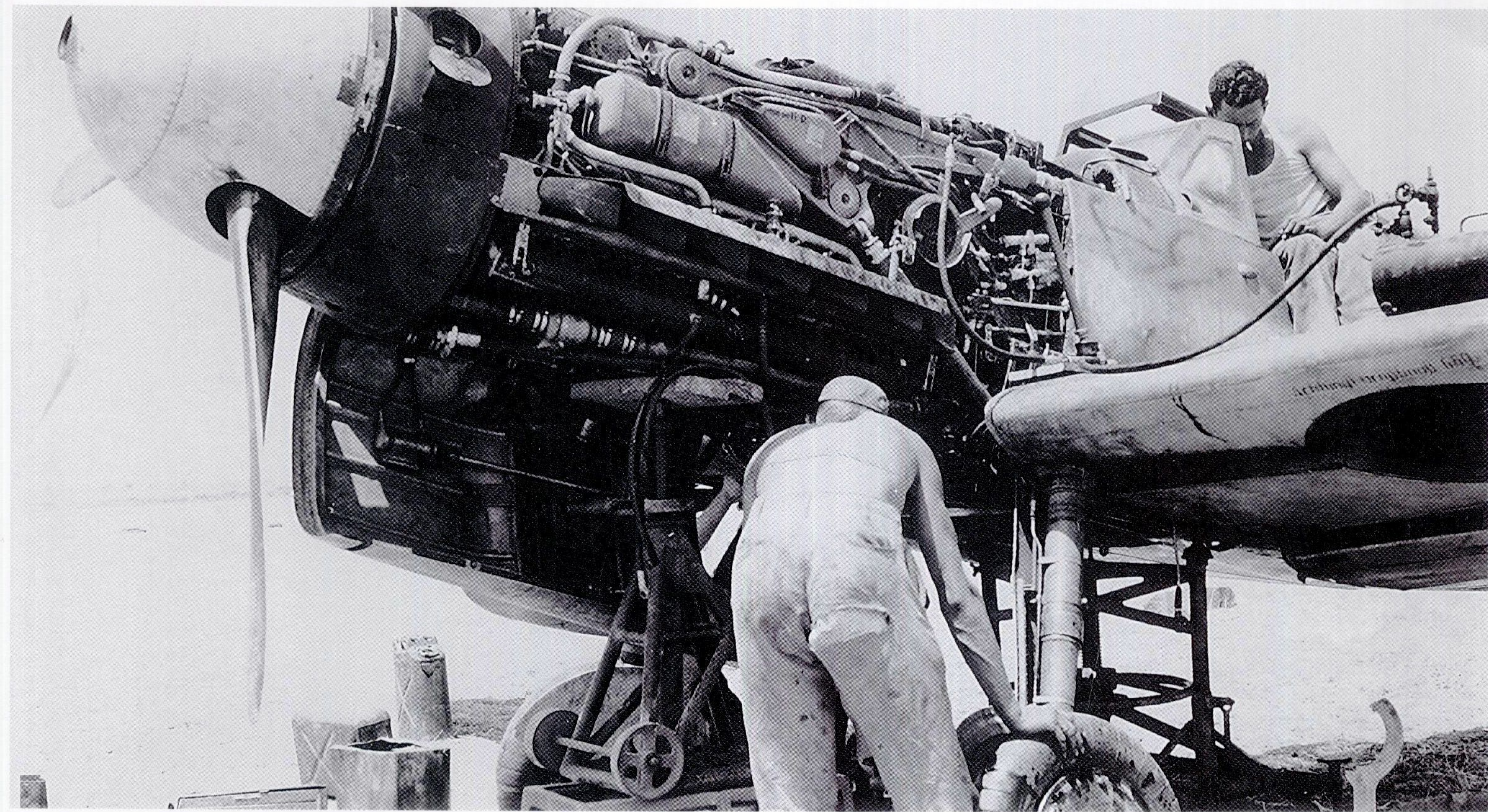
OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE AND RIGHT: British troops inspecting a Bf 109 G-2 coded 'Black 6' at Qued-Zarga in Tunisia. On 7 April 1943, Lt. Herbert Prior of 2.(H)/14 took off in this aircraft on his 101st war flight and was carrying out a tactical reconnaissance mission when he was shot down by anti-aircraft fire and captured by Allied forces. The photograph (*ABOVE*) shows Lt. Prior's aircraft being dismantled, the wings having already been removed. Note the heavy carbon deposits from the exhausts which have discoloured the fuselage under the cockpit area. The unit emblem, shown in close-up (*RIGHT*), was entirely black on a white shield and consisted of a winged eagle's head superimposed over a map of Africa with a small edelweiss to the lower left. The shadow of a man's hand forming Winston Churchill's famous 'Vee for Victory' sign has clearly been posed for the photographer. This aircraft was fitted with the oil deflector channel shown on Page 177.



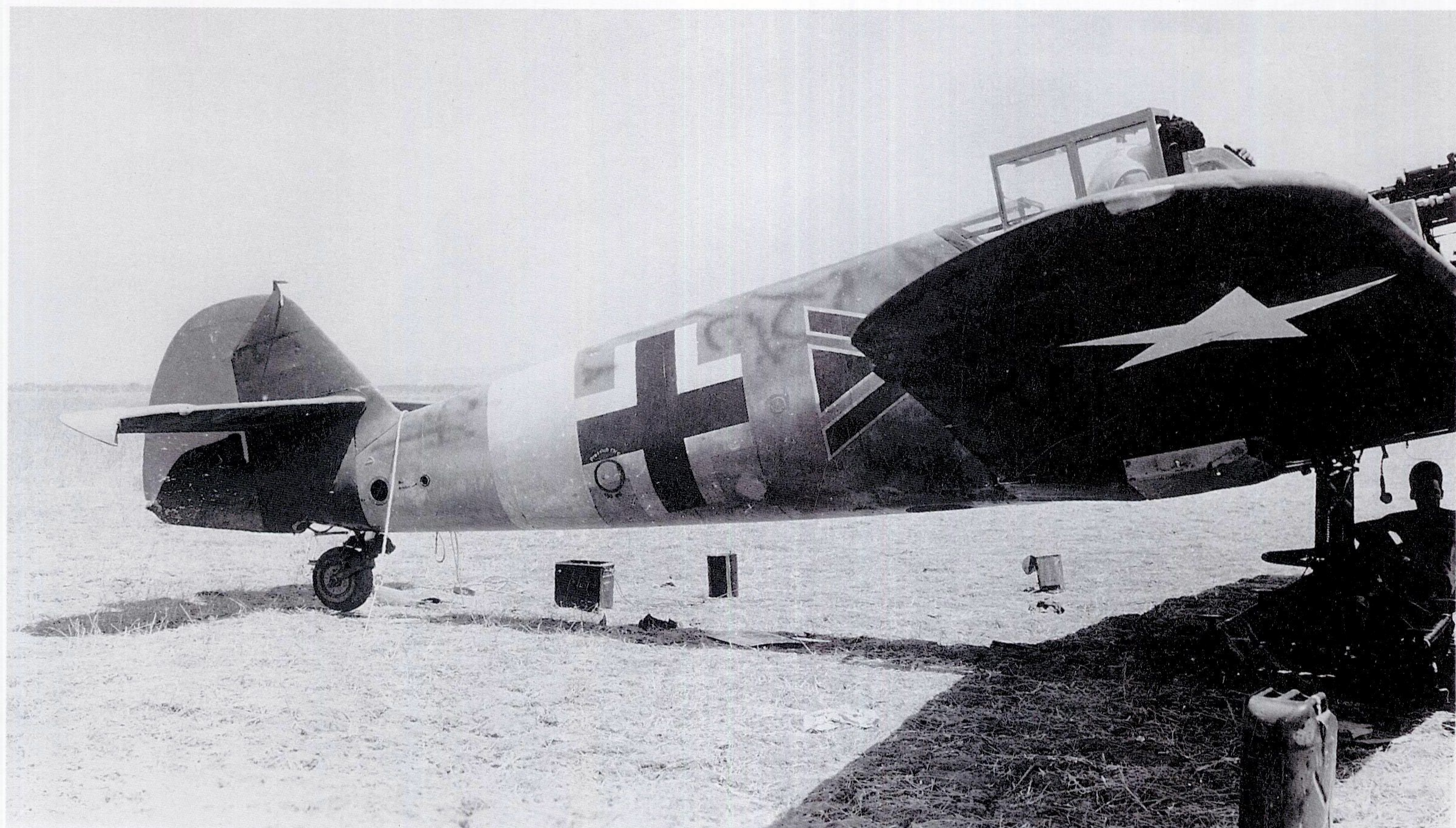
BELOW: Major Heinz Bär, seen in Tunisia in February 1943. Note the DAK (Deutsches Afrika Korps) watch strap on his left wrist and the flare pistols on the table.

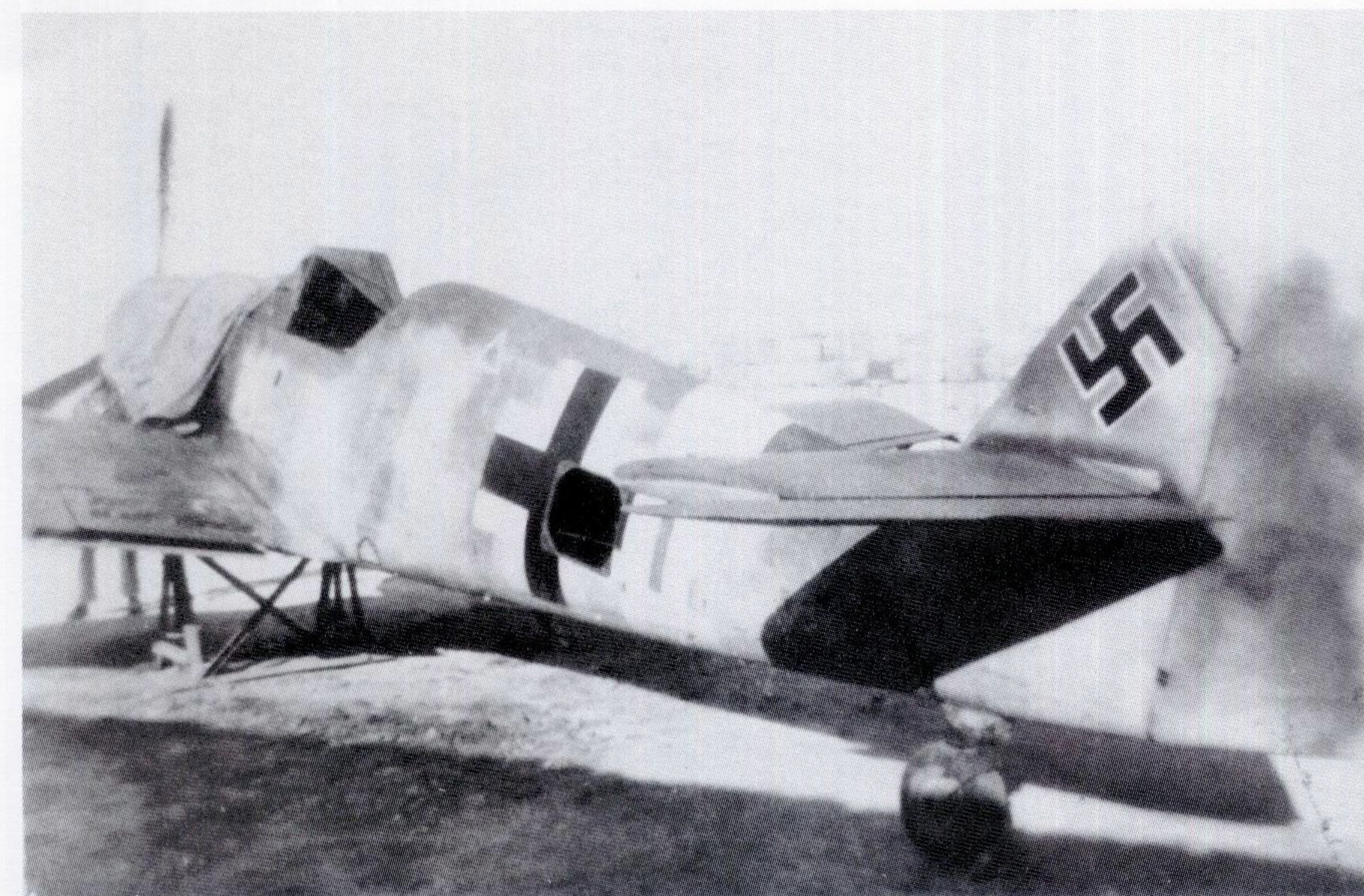


ABOVE AND LEFT: Major Heinz Bär, Kommandeur of I./JG 77, photographed on an airfield in Tunisia at the end of April 1943, just a few weeks before the unit withdrew and all Axis forces in Tunisia capitulated. Note that all the white theatre markings on the Bf 109 G-6 in the background have been covered to render them less conspicuous while the aircraft was on the ground.



ABOVE AND BELOW: Despite strict orders that abandoned aircraft and equipment should not fall into enemy hands intact, a surprising number of aircraft found in North Africa were relatively undamaged and a former pilot of the US 79th Fighter Group recalled that this Group alone possessed several captured Bf 109s, most of which were restored to an airworthy condition. It is believed that before it was captured, this Bf 109 G-2 was flown by Hptm. Heinz Bär, Kommandeur of I./JG 77, and was clearly discovered in such a good state of repair that it was considered possible to restore it to flying condition. In these two photographs, American technical personnel are working on the aircraft which has already had the swastika on the tail painted out and a US star painted under the wing. The camouflage on this aircraft appears to have been a standard mid-demarcation 78/79 scheme with the uppersurfaces oversprayed with green lines.

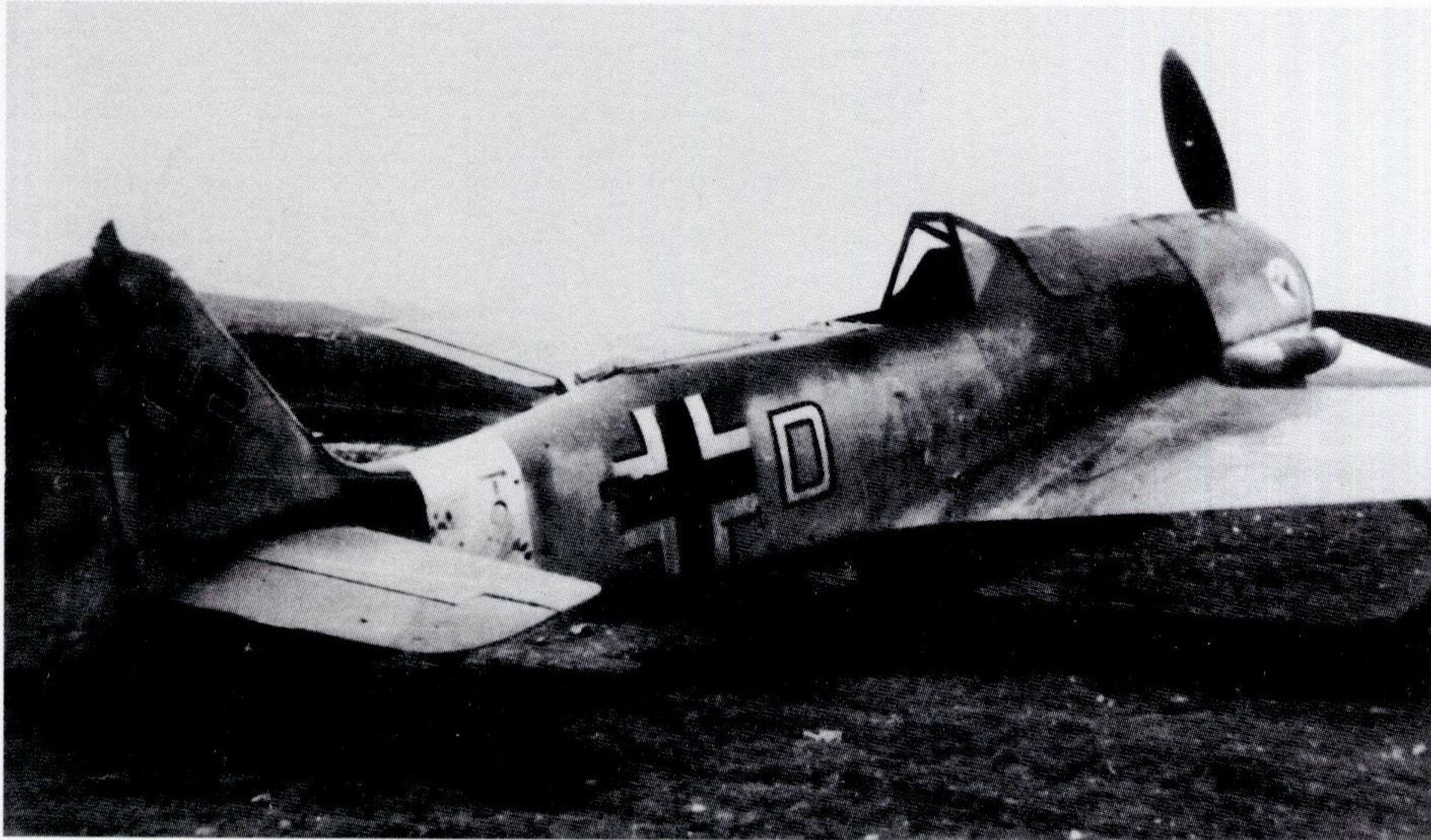




ABOVE AND RIGHT: On 5 May 1943, Oblt. Günther Hannak, the Staffelkapitän of 7./JG 27 took off from Biscari around midday with nine other aircraft from his Staffel to carry out a freie Jagd and visual reconnaissance mission over Malta. At least one of the participating aircraft was fitted with a camera to photograph shipping in the various bays. Oblt. Hannak led the formation and was flying an aircraft belonging to another member of the Staffel as his own aircraft was unserviceable. This aircraft had only been flown to Biscari that morning and still carried the Stammkennzeichen GP+IZ. The formation flew roughly due south and made landfall approximately over Comino at about 22,000-24,000 feet. It was at this point that Hannak noticed that his cockpit was filling with smoke and that oil was splashing onto his windscreen. The aircraft continued crossing the island but, when over the sea, Hannak realised it was pointless to continue. He jettisoned his canopy, which also carried away his oxygen mask, and had a temporary blackout. When he regained consciousness, he had lost height to about 16,000 feet. He then cut his engine and circled over the sea but, when his engine failed to restart, he picked the largest aerodrome he could see and glided down with his wheels up. As he came in to land, he saw a small formation of Spitfires climbing below him, but they did not appear to have seen him and he made a successful crash-landing on Malta where he was taken prisoner unwounded. Apart from the EK I and EK II, Hannak had been awarded the War Flight Badge in Gold with bar, had received the German Cross in Gold on 27 May 1942 while serving with I./JG 77 and had been decorated with the Knight's Cross on 1 July 1942 for 41 confirmed victories, most of them fighters. He had been Staffelkapitän of 7./JG 77 since 26 February 1943 and, up to the time he was shot down, claimed 49 victories, but the last eight had not been confirmed. The photograph (**ABOVE LEFT**) shows Oblt. Hannak's Bf 109 G-6 trop, W.Nr. 18046, after its emergency landing on Malta and after a salvage operation to remove the aircraft had begun. Just visible on the rear fuselage are the last two letters of the Stammkennzeichen.

RIGHT: An Fw 190 coded 'White 16' is made ready for another sortie. RAF Intelligence investigators found two aircraft with this code at Bizerta/Sidi-Ahmed, known to have been the base of III./SKG 10. Note that only two SC 50 bombs have been loaded on the ER 4 bomb rack and that this is attached to an ETC 501 carrier. The camouflage on the fuselage side appears to have been modified.





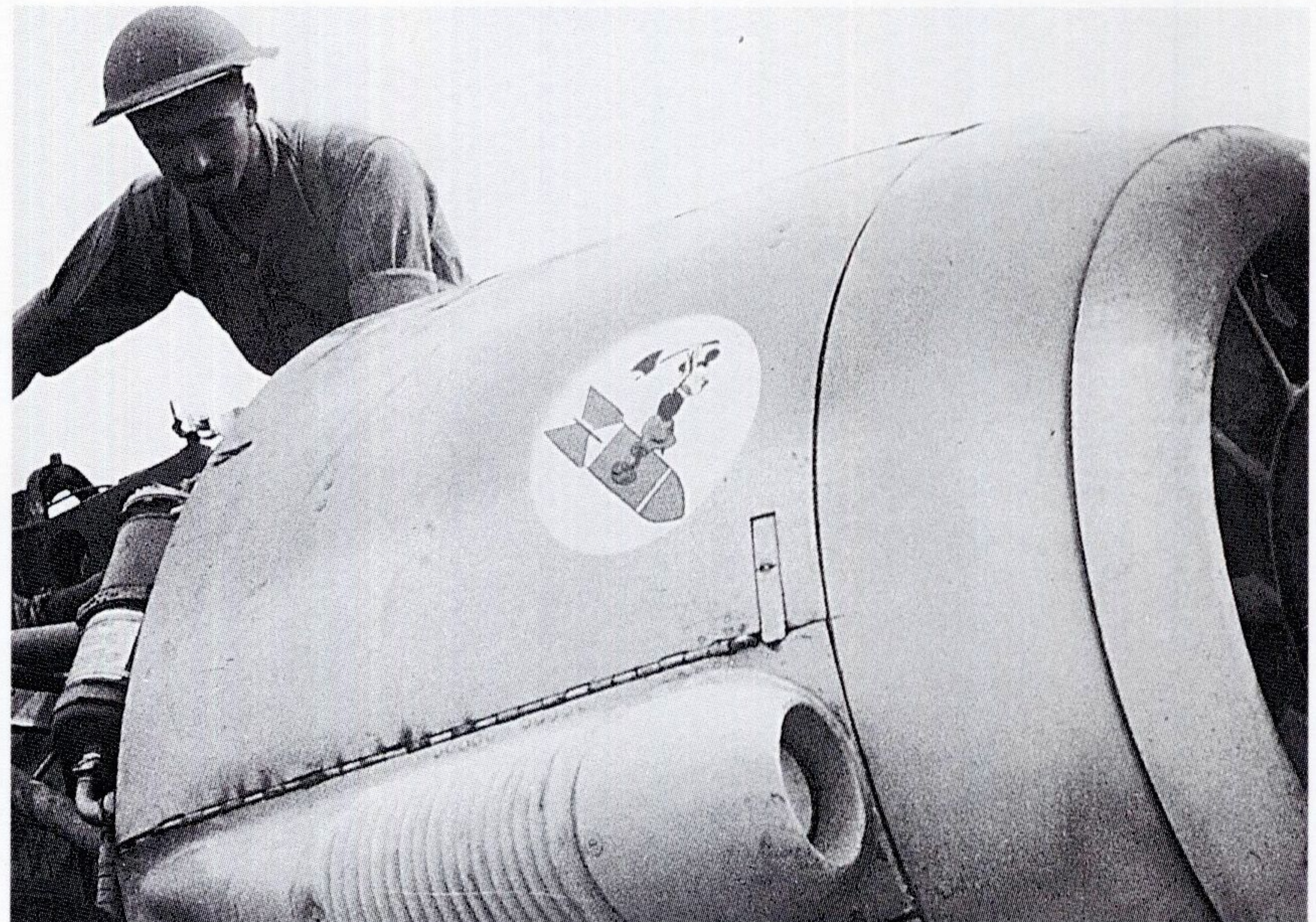
LEFT: The Fw 190 A-5/U3 trop was a special fighter-bomber version with additional armour protecting the underside of the engine and cockpit. Although Allied intelligence documents relating to captured aircraft in Tunisia refer to a number of Fw 190s, all coded 'D', it is believed that this machine, described as 'shot up', may have been W.Nr. 5973 although only the last three numbers appeared on the fin. This aircraft is still equipped with the so-called 'Duckboard', an ER 4 rack for four 50 kg bombs and carries a Mickey Mouse badge on the cowling. This badge is usually associated with the later Schlachtgeschwader 4 which did not come into existence until October 1943 but, as confirmed in the above intelligence records, as a number of Fw 190s examined in Tunisia are known to have had this same badge, it must have originated with Schlachtgeschwader 2. In one form or another, Mickey Mouse had a long association with the Schlachtflieger and after being used by Adolf Galland during the Spanish Civil War was taken by him to II.(Schlacht)/LG 2 where it became the Gruppe emblem before being passed on again to II./Sch.G 1. It was therefore perhaps only natural that Sch.G 2 should choose a similar design.

Focke-Wulf Fw 190 A-5/U3 trop 'White D' of II./Sch.G 2, possibly in Tunisia, May 1943

Although a fighter-bomber, this aircraft, believed to be W.Nr. 5973, was finished in the standard day fighter scheme comprising RLM 74 and 75 uppersurfaces over 76 undersurfaces. It had the almost universal white band and yellow nose panel seen on most German aircraft operating in North Africa and carried the badge of Sch.G 2 on the nose comprising a Mickey Mouse armed with a hatchet riding on a falling bomb. As confirmed by an intelligence report on a similar machine shot down over Malta, the trousers were red, and although not visible in the photograph, the spinner is believed to have been RLM 70 with a white tip.



**Mickey Mouse
emblem of
Sch.G 2**

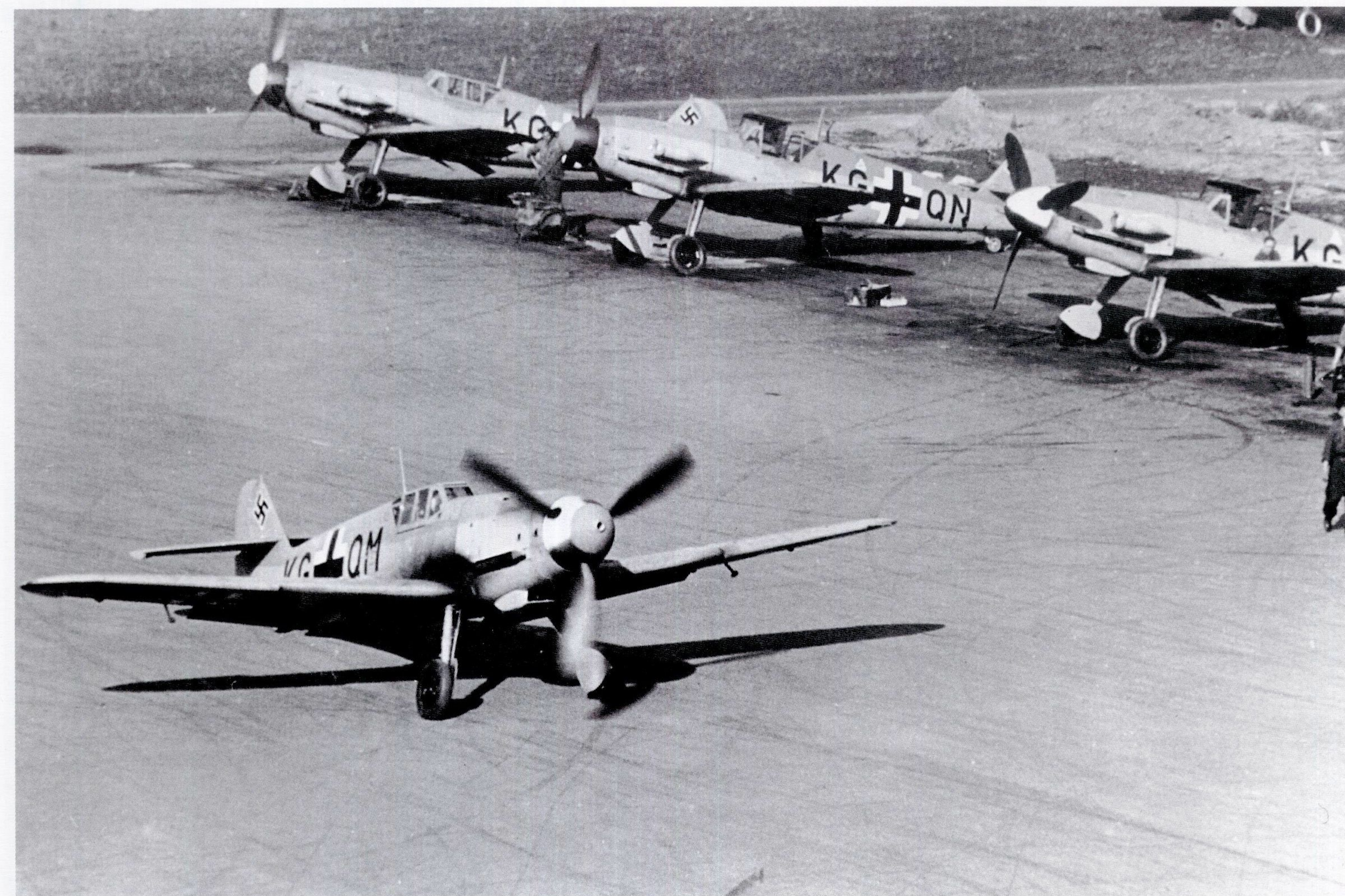


RIGHT: A similar Fw 190 of Sch.G 2, also fitted with an ER 4 bomb rack, being examined after capture. Note that in this instance the trousers in the Mickey Mouse emblem are clearly red. Interestingly, RAF reports on Fw 190s found in Tunisia mention a Mickey Mouse as well as a Minnie Mouse emblem, but despite these references to a Minnie Mouse, it is thought that in fact both versions show Mickey, one wearing red trousers and the other, not a skirt, but a butcher's apron. This possibility is strengthened by the connection between the German word Schlacht, as in Schlachtflieger, and Schlachter, the latter meaning butcher; hence the butcher's apron. The colour of the bomb is not known for certain but past convention suggests it may have been green and although no evidence to the contrary has been found, it was certainly not as dark as has been illustrated elsewhere.

RIGHT: The machine in the foreground was probably the most photographed Fw 190 in North Africa. Numerous photographs exist and, taken from various angles at various times, provide a record of its deterioration. The aircraft, an Fw 190 G-2 fighter bomber, W.Nr. 2676, was probably delivered to III./SKG 10, although when found at El Aouina early in 1943, it still retained its Stammkennzeichen KM+EY. Already partly destroyed when discovered, a combination of rough handling and souvenir hunting eventually reduced the aircraft to scrap. The machine visible in the background - but, sadly, practically ignored by almost all photographers - is an Hs 129 anti-tank aircraft of 8./Sch.G 2.

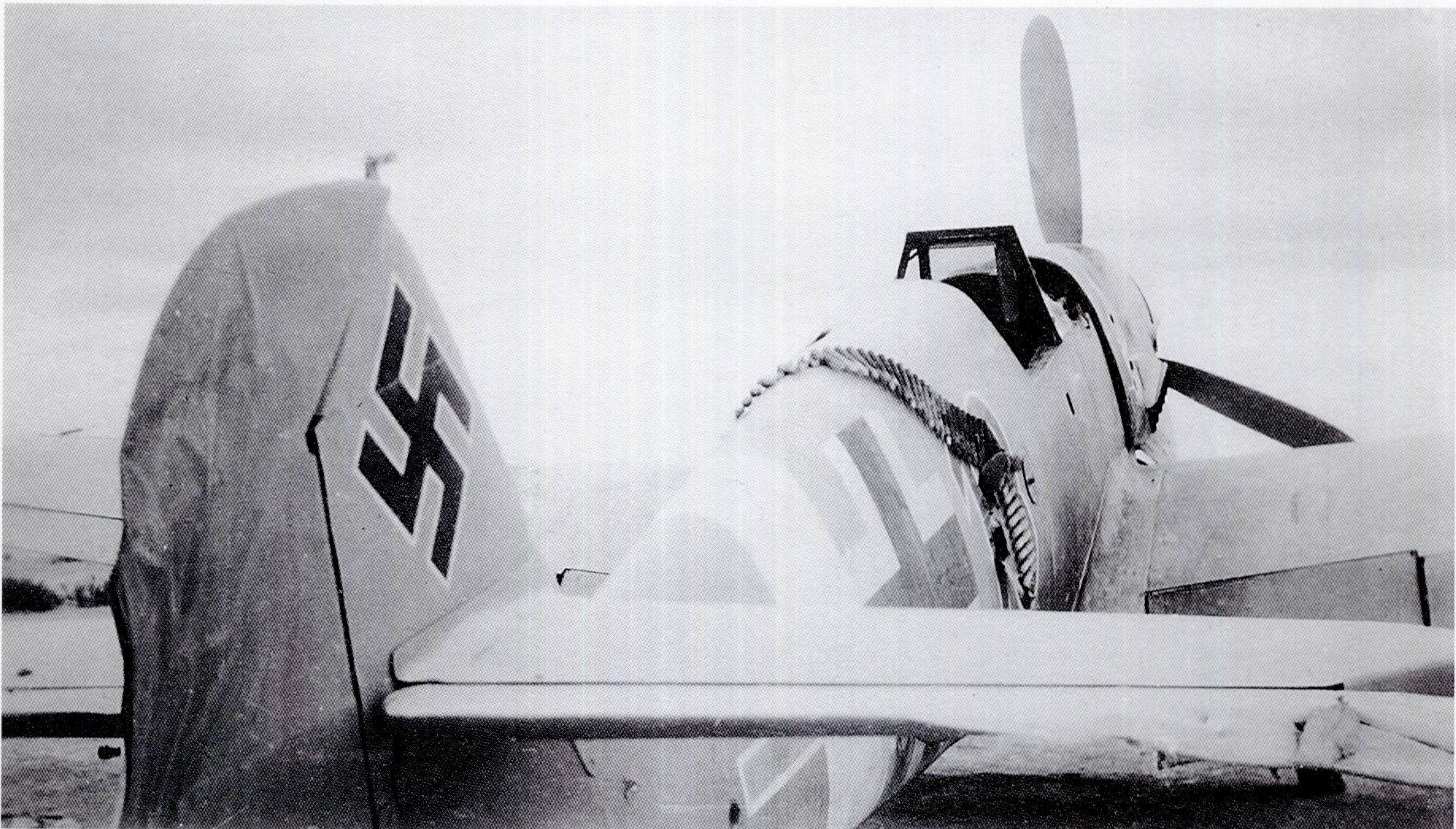


BELOW: A factory photograph showing that the 78/79 tropical finish was applied at the point of manufacture as well as at unit level and in the field. At this point in the war, factories would allocate specific aircraft to particular units and could accommodate special requests regarding armament, equipment and finish. Hence, in this photograph, it may be seen that whereas the machine on the right has a standard green 70 spinner, the spinners on the other three aircraft have already been finished in the colours required by the units to which they will be delivered.

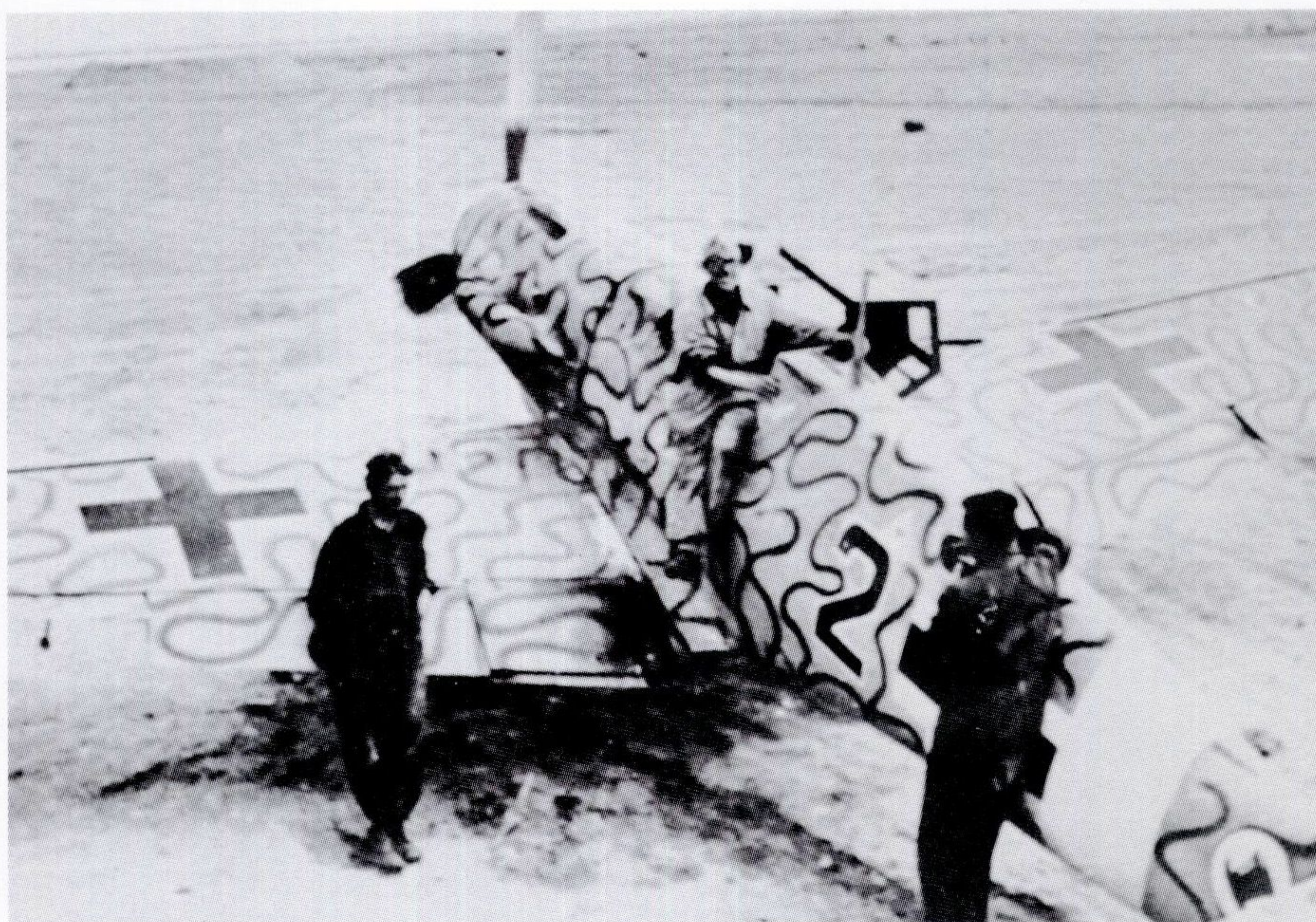




THIS PAGE: When this Bf 109 G-2 trop of 5./JG 27 was discovered at Merdumastill, it was still armed. Note the traces of the factory code barely visible on the fuselage side (*LEFT*) and that although the aircraft is coded 'Black 13', the Gruppe bar is red.

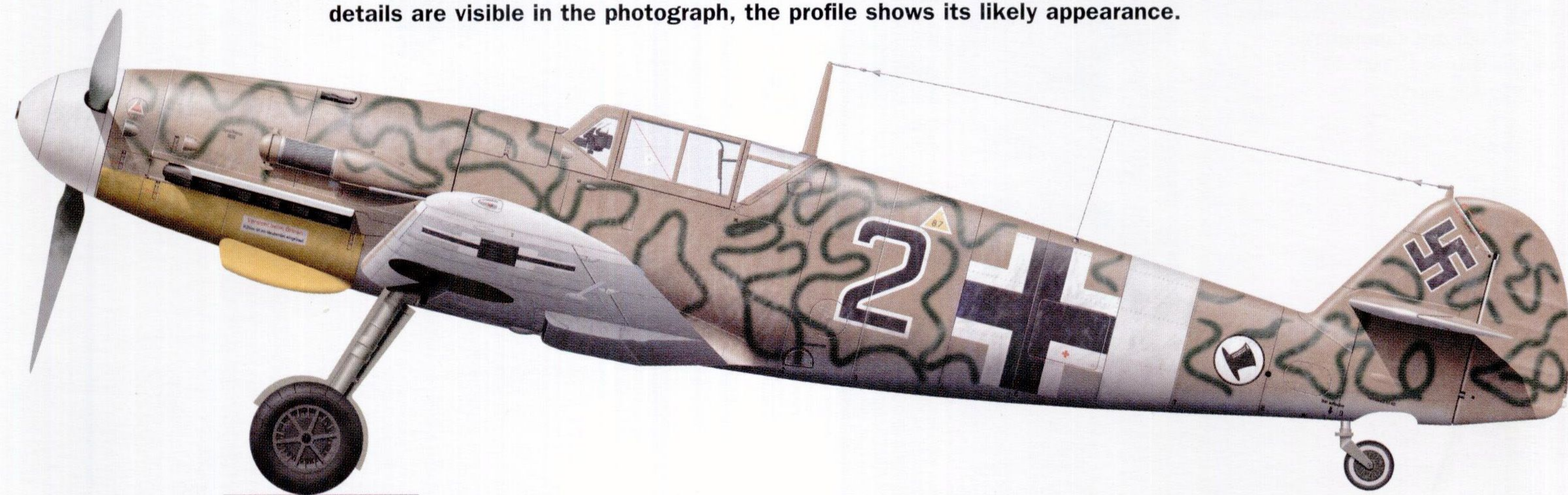


RIGHT: This Bf 109 G-2 trop of 2./JG 77 was originally finished in a mid-demarcation scheme of 78 and 79 but later received a particularly unattractive version of the Wellenmuster, or wave type camouflage, probably applied at unit level and almost certainly in a dark green. Note the Staffel emblem on the rear fuselage.



Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-2 trop 'Black 2' of 2./JG 77, Tunisia, 1943

This aircraft is believed to have been camouflaged in an overall light tan colour on the uppersurfaces with sprayed meandering lines, probably in a dark green. As this is thought to have been applied over a European scheme, the undersurfaces were probably 76. The black numeral on the fuselage side was thinly outlined in white and the spinner, shown here completely white, may have had areas of wear. The Staffel badge appeared aft of the white fuselage band and little of the original 70 green remained on the propeller blades. As no tail details are visible in the photograph, the profile shows its likely appearance.



ABOVE: The pilot of another, similarly camouflaged Bf 109 G of 2./JG 77, evidently being congratulated on his return from a successful sortie.

BELOW: Although the angle of the aircraft to the camera makes it difficult to see, this captured Bf 109 G would appear to have a similar camouflage. Note the worn area on the spinner.



RIGHT: Pilots of JG 77 in Tunisia in 1943. From the left, they are, Major Bär, unknown, Lt. Armin Köhler and the Kommodore, Major Müncheberg.

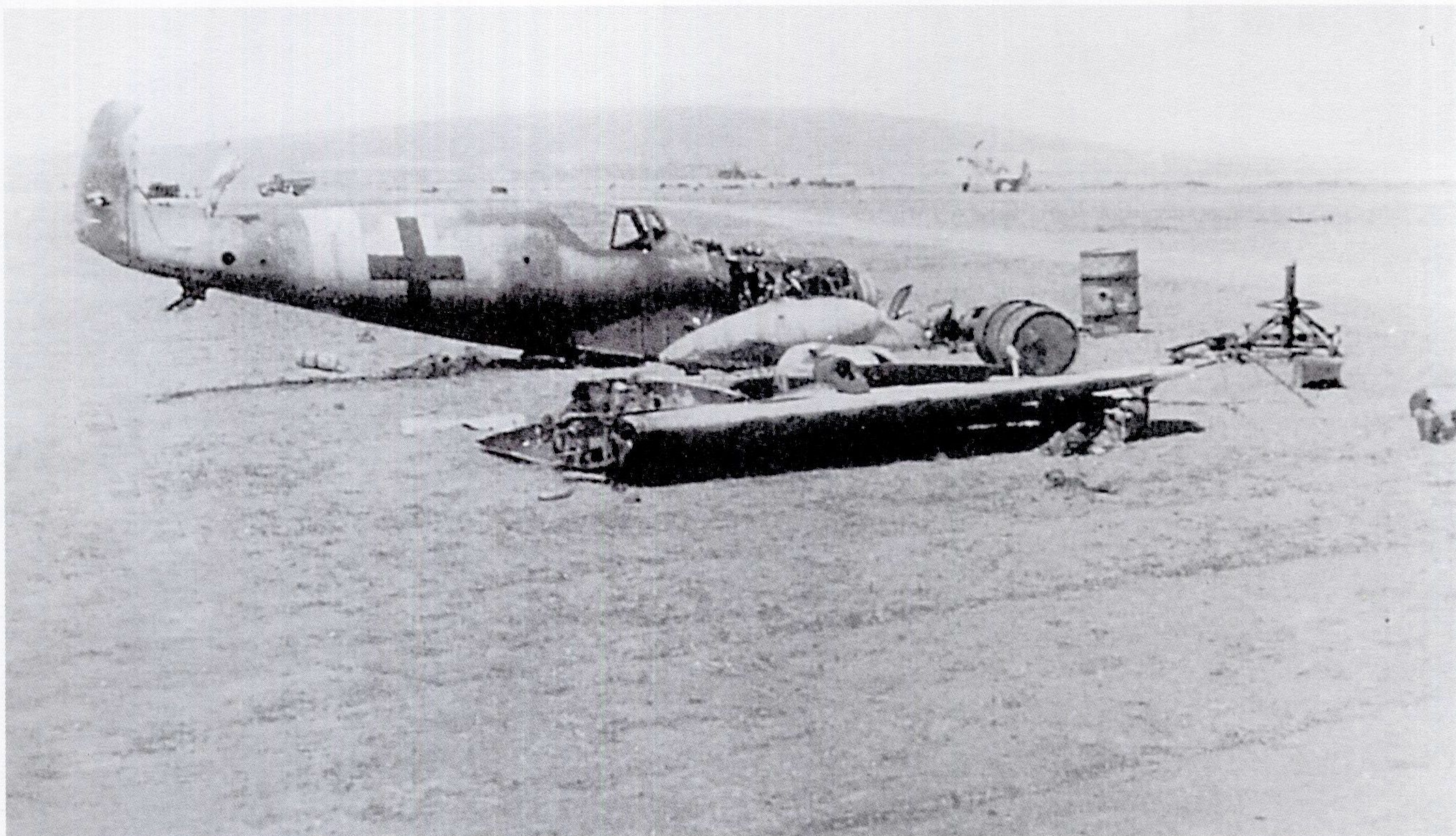


BELOW: A Bf 109 G-6 trop in Tunisia. This aircraft has been identified as 'White 4', W.Nr. 16416, which belonged to 4./JG 77 and which was recorded as 100 per cent destroyed (ie written off) at Soliman as a result of enemy action. It was later captured by US troops and shipped to the United States where the Evaluation Branch of the Technical Data Laboratory allocated it the serial no EB-102. Although some damage is evident in this view, the machine appears relatively intact, but in the final days in Tunisia, the Luftwaffe considered any aircraft which could not be flown out a write-off, hence the 100 per cent damage assessment. Exactly why this particular example was shipped to the US is nevertheless a mystery since several USAAF units in Tunisia are known to have captured a number of airworthy G-6s or there were available other machines which had already been repaired by USAAF technical personnel. Once repaired in the US, EB-102 did not long survive: it was severely damaged in a landing mishap on 1 September 1944, following which it is presumed not to have been repaired.



RIGHT:

This Bf 109 G-6 trop may also have belonged to JG 77, although it carries no discernible code or unit identification. The vertical bar visible on the white fuselage band is believed to be part of the Stammkennzeichen rather than a Gruppe bar.



BELOW: Another of the wrecked aircraft discovered at Tunis El Aouina was this Bf 109 G-2 which, at first glance, might seem insignificant. It appears, however, that the machine may once have been marked with the chevron and two horizontal bars of a Geschwaderkommodore and might therefore have been one of the aircraft flown by Major Johannes Steinhoff, Kommodore of JG 77. The finish would seem to consist of the standard European colours 74, 75 and 76. Note the wingless remains of an Me 323 six-engined transport aircraft in the right background.

